CORONET

Thorne Douglas

KILLRAINE

**He had challenged a tyrant –
Now he must win – or die**

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2022 with funding from
Kahle/Austin Foundation

https://archive.org/details/killraine0000doug

F 7385

KILLRAINE

Rance spurred up alongside Killraine, opened the simple loop in the nearest dangling rope. "No fancy knots for you, feller. You choke, slow and hard." Standing in his stirrups, he raised the open noose.

For Killraine, then, in what he knew would be the last moment of his life, time stood strangely still. The air was sweet and clean and had a taste; the sunlight on the hills was marvellously beautiful; the feel of the horse between his thighs was a joy; and in a moment he would know none of this again. Nor would he kiss Jenny's mouth or hold her body or—

Now..."

BFS 26.1.78 G (JFR)

Killraine

Thorne Douglas

CORONET BOOKS
Hodder Fawcett, New York

Copyright © 1974 by Fawcett Publications Inc.

First published 1975 by Fawcett Publications Inc., New York

Coronet Edition 1977

The characters and situations in this book are entirely imaginary and bear no relation to any real person or actual happening

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which this is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

Printed in Great Britain for
Hodder Fawcett Ltd.,
Mill Road, Dunton Green, Sevenoaks, Kent
(Editorial Office: 47 Bedford Square, London, WC1 3DP)
by Hazell Watson & Viney Ltd, Aylesbury, Bucks

ISBN 0 340 21752 9

GREENWICH LIBRARIES

F 7385

KILLRAINE

1

It was what the Texans called a stag, a steer that had not been castrated until after it had reached full growth, and it was still possessed of full, bullish muscle, heavy shoulders, thick neck, sharp and dangerous forward-curving horns. It had a bull's aggression, too, turning on Killraine each time he neared it, dropping its head, shaking its horns, pawing with splayed forefoot, and rumbling a warning from its massive chest that sounded like distant thunder. Killraine had been driving cattle long enough to know just how dangerous such an animal could be, but, he thought ruefully, not long enough to know how to handle it.

But something must be done about it, he told himself. A broad-shouldered man in his early thirties, muscular and thick-chested, though not very tall, he eyed the stag warily as he sat his horse on the flank of the enormous Rancho Bravo herd, seventeen hundred Texas longhorns halted for the day in the Arkansas River bottomlands. Hooking and snorting, the animal swaggered through the herd, bullying a yearling here, challenging a real bull there, occasionally futilely trying to mount a cow. It had a whole segment of the herd restless, snorty, and soon might have them in a mood to run. From Connecticut originally, Killraine had been a professional soldier until a

few months ago, not a cattleman, and though after years in the U.S. Cavalry he yielded to no man in his ability to handle horses, working cattle still held many mysteries for him.

And, he supposed, tipping back the blue uniform-hat he still wore, though the rest of his garb was now that of a Texas drover—flannel shirt, denim pants under leather leggings, high-heeled boots and spurs—he should admit his inexperience and ask for help from someone else. But—he stroked his sharp-pointed, neatly trimmed and waxed cavalry moustachios—right now especially, that went against the grain.

A month ago it would not have, but now, as they neared the end of the long and grueling drive from south of the Nueces River to Pueblo, Colorado Territory, the whole attitude of the men of Rancho Bravo toward him, even though he was one-quarter owner of the outfit, had changed in a way that made a request for help something damaging to his pride. And while Phillip Killraine owned little on God's earth that was material, save for his interest in the herd, pride was something with which even he admitted he was perhaps oversupplied.

All he knew was that in the beginning the Texans, every one an ex-Confederate, had been suspicious of him as a Northerner and former Union combat officer. That was natural enough; he'd accepted it and tried hard on the thousand-mile drive to prove himself to them and win their respect and trust. He'd been careful never to shirk hard work or risk, to deal as fairly as he could, and, in short, to make them see that he was no longer the enemy, but one of them. For a while, he had thought he had succeeded, but lately he'd begun to wonder. Maybe he was oversensitive, and yet there had been enough little things—gibes and wounding jokes, and growing coolness—to prove that he had fooled himself. He was still the Yankee in a nest of rebels, still the Easterner among Westerners, still the greenhorn among experienced cowmen. And it seemed nowadays that no one, not even Henry Gannon, missed an opportunity to rub that in.

But pride or not, he'd have to get some help with this

confounded animal. He was just about to rein his horse around when hoofs drummed, coming toward him. Wheeling his mount, he recognized the rider as Carter Fanning.

Killraine's lips thinned. Fanning was the last man he'd have turned to for assistance. Lately, no one had been more abrasive, taken more needling swipes at him than Fanning. Indeed, Killraine had begun to wonder if Fanning weren't the source of the slow poison polluting the pool of respect and trust that he'd hoped to keep full and pure. Of all the twenty Texans with the herd, only Fanning seemed to have a real, a genuine grudge against him; but Killraine still had no idea what had caused it.

Let that ride for now, he thought as Fanning reined up. Carter Fanning was a handsome, lean-faced man in his late twenties, worn like everyone to bone and rawhide by months on the trail. And, like all the others save Phil Killraine, seemingly born in the saddle with a riata in his hands.

"Havin' trouble, Mr. Killraine?" Fanning's smile was contemptuous and amused and it rankled Killraine.

Nevertheless, he checked his temper, not an easy thing, his nature being that of an animal bred to fight: a pit bull, perhaps, or gamecock. But four years of war and some months with Rancho Bravo had taught him self-discipline. His voice was civil as he answered. "As a matter of fact, yes. That confounded black steer yonder."

Fanning's smile was still ironic as he watched the stag strut among the grazing cattle and stop now and then to horn at a smaller animal. "Why, he's rememberin' how it used to feel when he had all his gear. Stags git like that sometimes. All you got to do is cut him out, rope him, and bust him hard two, three times. That'll take the starch plumb out'n him."

Killraine felt his cheeks burn. Everybody knew that although he had learned to use a rope to some extent, he still missed half his throws, and often, when he made a catch, was not sure what to do next. He did not fault himself for that; he had his own specialties, and without them there would have been no Rancho Bravo. But now

Fanning was waiting to see him try his hand with the black stag and make a fool of himself. He would not accept the challenge.

"You make it sound easy. Suppose you show me how it's done." Deliberately, he edged his voice, owner speaking to employee.

Fanning's eyes shadowed. Then he said, "Why, sho'. You're the boss. I'll chouse him out and you stay here and turn him if he tries to run back in. You can do *that*, can't you?"

"I can try," Killraine answered tersely.

Fanning touched his hat-brim in exaggerated, mocking salute, turned his mount, edged into the herd. Watching, Killraine was filled with admiration at the way man and horse sifted through the cattle without alarming them. The stag saw them coming, sensed it was their quarry, tried to slink away. But seemingly without direction from its rider, Fanning's mustang went after it, and, each time it turned, was there blocking it. Cleverly, Fanning worked it out to the flank, the stag not realizing what was happening. Then the animal caught on; suddenly it kinked its tail, dodged into the open, and quit the herd.

Like most longhorns, it was race-horse fast, a black shadow as it streaked across the lowground. Fanning whooped, spurred, shaking out his rope, after it like an arrow from a bow. "Come on, Killraine!" he yelled. "I'll show you how it's done!"

Blood stirred, Killraine ran his horse, unlatching his own rope, fumbling to work out a loop. After a quarter of a mile, he and Fanning closed on the stag from either flank. Then Fanning's arm whirled once or twice. A rawhide circle sailed out, dropped neatly over black-tipped horns. Fanning whooped again, and his little horse sat back. The rope stretched taut, the stag hit its end full tilt, and in that instant something had to give: horse, saddle, riata—or the stag.

It was the steer. Head jerked around, rump sailing high, it somersaulted, landing on its side with an impact that seemed to jar the ground. As Killraine pulled up a few yards away, it rose, panting, dazed, saw him and

charged. Fanning gave it slack, then jerked the horse back again. Once more the stag was thrown with brutal force. But, strong and tough, it scrambled up immediately, and this time it turned on Fanning and ran straight up the rope.

Fanning laughed; his little horse dodged and shifted with quicksilver speed. The stag rushed past, hit rope's end again as the horse settled back, dug in. But now, as Killraine stared amazedly, the steer did not fall. It kept on going, and Fanning's yell had a different timbre as the saddle with Fanning in it slid over the horse's neck, popped cinch flying, and hit the dust, skidding for a dozen yards, towed by the riata.

The big, black longhorn halted, spun around. It raised its head, nostrils streaming, as a dazed Fanning struggled to unstirrup and scrambled to his feet. Then it bellowed, dropped its head, and charged.

Fanning stared, then turned and ran. Killraine's paralysis broke; his spurs drove home, his horse leaped, he swung his rope. Now Fanning was running for his life, the steer right behind, and only the fact that one hoof was tangled in the rope that dragged the saddle slowed it enough to give Fanning any chance at all. Alone, he would have surely been finished—but Killraine was there.

The stag was unaware that Killraine's horse was overtaking it. His wrist turned loosely, in a way he'd practiced, built a loop. Time enough for one throw and only one, and it had better be good, or those horns would be in Fanning's back. Killraine prayed and threw, aiming for the head—and missed.

Only half open, the loop slapped across the lowered head and neck, slid limply free. There was no time to build another. Killraine turned his horse, spurred it hard, drove it straight for the charging steer.

As the horse's chest slammed into the stag's rump, Killraine kicked feet free of stirrups. The stag went down, and Killraine's chestnut tripped over its kicking body, somersaulted. Killraine, already leaping free, hit hard, on hands and knees. He heard the chestnut scream, then his own coiled-spring muscles were bringing him to his feet.

Steer and horse, entangled in rope, were a single, kicking mass. Then, from the swirling dust, the stag scrambled to its feet, one horn broken at the boss, dangling, spurting blood. Pivoting, it faced Killraine, shook its head wildly.

Philip Killraine was taking no more chances. As the stag dropped its head, his hand went to the flapped holster on his right hip. The scabbard's cover had kept his army Colt in place. The steer charged, the gun came up; Killraine aimed deliberately and fired. As the shot sounded, a plume of white smoke fogged the air, blanking out his vision. From behind it came a weird bellow. Killraine thumbed back the hammer for another shot; the smoke cleared and he saw the steer down and threshing. Carefully, he aimed again, put another ball behind a foreleg for certainty, and instantly the creature died. Killraine sucked in a shuddering breath; then he saw what had happened to his horse and he swore furiously.

It had risen and stood trembling on three legs, one hoof dangling limply, fore leg broken.

His best mount, a gallant animal, sturdy, willing—and his bumbling with a rope had cost its life. Wasting no time, he did what was necessary. Limping to it, he took the reins, pulled down its head, shot it between the eyes, jumping back as it fell. Then he turned away, mouth dry. Mechanically, hands shaking slightly, he reloaded the gun, the first law of survival out here, observed automatically. As he capped the last nipple, he saw riders, drawn by the shots, coming toward him from the herd. Then a voice behind him rasped, "Killraine—"

He turned. Fanning stood there, smeared with dust, trembling, his dark eyes lit not with gratitude but rage. "Damn it, you had an easy throw—"

"Shut up," Killraine said fiercely.

"A six-year-old Texas kid coulda made that throw!"

Killraine looked at the dead horse, and though he knew that Fanning was suffering from reaction, was bound to be in a kind of shock, his temper slipped. "And a six-year-old Union cavalryman would have had the wit

to keep his saddle in repair—and the decency not to bad-mouth a man who'd just saved his life."

"Why—" Though Killraine still held the gun unsheathed, muzzle down, Fanning's hand made a motion toward his holster. But it was open, without a flap, and the gun had spilled from it when he went over the horse's neck. His fingers groped; he stared at Killraine wordlessly, eyes flaring. Then he turned away, spat, went to the stag, unwound his rope from its horns and coiled it. Killrain watched him for a moment, then sheathed his gun, went to his dead mount and worked loose his saddle. He had just got it free when Gannon and two other riders from the herd came up.

There were four equal partners in the strange enterprise called Rancho Bravo, each with his own responsibility. Henry Gannon was the master cattleman and trail boss; his word was law when it came to working and driving stock. A Texan like the rest, he was tall, redheaded, rangy, with a homely freckled face that once—ages ago it seemed to Phil—had smiled readily and warmly. But months of responsibility, danger, sacrifice, and grief had long since made that smile a rarity. Now Gannon's eyes were cold, his face stern, as he looked at the carnage. "Fanning! Phil! What the hell is this?"

Sleeving dust from his face, Fanning faced Henry coolly. Not only were they old friends, but Fanning was no ordinary hired hand. His own brand was on three hundred head in the Rancho Bravo herd, a fact which, Killraine knew, gave him the confidence to be insolent with one of the major owners, since he could not be fired.

"*Mister* Killraine, here," Fanning said bitterly, "was havin' some trouble with that black stag. He wasn't man enough to handle it himself, so he asked me to do it for him. I choused the critter out and busted it a few times, and last time my bellyband broke and I went on a Texas sleigh-ride. The stag come after me and Killraine tried to rope it and couldn't make his catch." His contempt was

heavy in the words. "So he knocked it down, broke his horse's leg. Then he shot the stag and had to shoot the horse."

Gannon bit his lip. "That steer'd have been worth a pile in Pueblo. Phil, dammit, did you have to shoot him?"

"No, I didn't. I could have let him gore Fanning."

Gannon looked at the riata still trailing from Killraine's saddle horn. "All you had to do," he said wearily, "was rope the bastard."

"Well I couldn't rope him! So I shot him! And there's an end to it, except for this! The stag and my horse both would still be alive if Fanning had kept his saddle in fit condition!"

Fanning whirled on him. "The ring pulled out! You check that rig, it's good greased and everything, but you never know about a ring until it goes! The whole thing wouldn't have been a hill of beans if you could ever learn to use a rope, you—"

"That's enough," Henry Gannon cut in, voice and eyes making Fanning break off just in time. "It's done now, and no help for it. Fanning, pack your saddle and ride in bareback. Bledsoe, back to herd. Mangum, bleed that critter and send a wagon out for it and Captain Killraine's gear. Phil, swing up. I'll ride you in." He freed a stirrup, put down a hand, and Killraine nimbly came up behind the cantle. Then Gannon put his horse at a trot toward the wagons in the distance.

2

That night, Philip Killraine was still sore from the fall, but his mind was calmer as he circled the vast, sleeping herd on a fresh horse. Nightguard, with the sky a vast dome of stars, the river gurgling not far away behind a line of brush and trees, and the tired cattle lying down, was a good time to think, to get things in perspective. His life had taken so many unexpected twists over the past half-decade, had been so full of violence and surprise, that he needed to look backwards as well as forwards to get things straight. Connecticut, West Point, even the battlefields of Virginia: they all seemed dreamlike and very far away just now.

As a boy in Hartford, he'd been adventurous—not mean, just a handful—and soldiering had always appealed to him. Graduating from West Point among the top twenty in the class of '57, he'd picked the branch of service with the most romance and action—the cavalry. Well, he thought wryly, the romance had been in short supply, but the action had been plentiful. Four years of war for causes he believed in fiercely—the preservation of the Union and the freeing of the slaves—had left him almost grateful for what had seemed to be a placid assignment in defeated Texas on occupation duty, commanding

a cavalry troop in the little town of Double Oaks, below the Nueces.

His future then had seemed clear-cut: another twenty years of doing what they told him, going where they sent him, and, if he were lucky, eventual retirement on a colonel's pension, or a brigadier's. His sister, Evelyn, had even come to Texas to keep house for him, and he himself had done his best to handle his assignment in a way that would contribute to a reconciliation between the two halves of the shattered country, even-handedly and without grudge or bitterness.

What he had not counted on was Henry Gannon and four thousand Texas longhorns.

Returning from four years in Hood's Texas Cavalry, Henry had found his father dead and the Gannon ranch near Double Oaks swarming with wild cattle. Texas was bankrupt, its brush country full of longhorns that, for five years, had multiplied like fleas in a carpet, and Henry's cattle were no exception in that respect. But there was no market for the beef; the animals were worthless. At least until Elias Whitton appeared and struck the spark that later flamed into Rancho Bravo.

Whitton, a Negro, had been a slave and had run away before the war, not north but west, into Comanche country beyond the Pecos River. Adopted into the tribe, he'd won their respect. Years later, back in eastern Texas to savor the new freedom the war had won for him, he had been haunted by a memory—that of vast reaches of virgin grassland beyond the Pecos and above the Big Bend of the Rio Bravo del Norte—what Americans called the Rio Grande. Falling in with Gannon, working for food and a place to sleep, he told Gannon of the country he had seen—a world of grass, an empire of it, under Comanche domination, and no blade ever cropped by a cow. It was a meeting, and a tale, of which Killraine was then unaware, but one that finally would uproot him and fling him headlong into a new, exciting, sometimes perplexing life.

Still, perhaps, nothing would have come of it, except for Josh Weymouth, who arrived in Double Oaks as Federal Treasury Agent and government-appointed boss of

the defeated area's civil affairs. Weymouth was a Texan who had been a Union sympathizer; Henry's father, rabid Secessionist, had run him out of the state for his views. Now Weymouth had an old score to settle and the power to do it. Gannon senior was past reaching, but Weymouth could strike at Henry—and did so, with enormous, rigged tax liens on Gannon's land which Henry had no hope of paying. The land was lost, he had to move his cattle—and had no place to take them.

So Rancho Bravo was a dream born of desperation. Henry and Elias made a decision. Somehow they would move Henry's longhorns west, beyond the Pecos, and if Elias could win the consent of the Comanches there, establish a ranch—the biggest ranch, they swore, that Texas had ever seen. And they would call it Rancho Bravo.

But a bankrupt cowman and a former slave could not, alone, make that dream come true. Then Loosh Calhoon arrived in Double Oaks.

Before the war, Calhoon had been a wealthy Carolina planter. Defeat had cost him land and fortune, and years in a Northern prison camp had cost him his right hand at the wrist, the result of torture by a brutal Yankee guard. Calhoon vowed to find that man and make him pay for that lost hand. He struck a trail that led him to Texas; the guard had been Josh Weymouth's son.

"The enemy of my enemy is my friend," the old saying went: Calhoon had thrown in with Henry and Elias against Josh Weymouth. Intelligent, imaginative, superb fighting man, he'd come up with the idea of recruiting jobless cowhands to round up and drive the Rancho Bravo beef, paying them one longhorn for every brute they branded for Rancho Bravo. He'd led the battle against gunmen hired by Weymouth, who would stop at nothing to take full vengeance for his old grudge—and line his pockets simultaneously. And—crucially for Phil Killraine—Calhoon had courted and won Killraine's sister, Evelyn.

As commander of the troops in Double Oaks, Killraine had been sucked into the war between Weymouth and Rancho Bravo anyhow. Weymouth had tried to use him

and his command for purposes corrupt enough to turn Phil's stomach. When he rebelled, Weymouth pulled strings to have him transferred to a remote frontier post. And then Killraine had to make the hardest decision of his life—whether to accept that transfer or resign and throw in with Rancho Bravo.

He resigned; and not merely for his sister's sake. Because by now he'd been infected by the dream as well. Four thousand cattle to be moved to a new land, the establishment of a great ranch. And then the moving on of half the herd to an untapped market: the mines of Colorado, starved for beef since before the war, and with raw gold to pay fantastic prices for every head delivered there on the hoof! The money they could make if they could get a herd to Colorado was staggering: the hardships and risks they must face to do that were dismaying, even terrifying. It was a tremendous challenge, but to Killraine it was more than that; it was something greater than himself that he could serve, and not only for the profit. The country needed beef to grow; Texas had it and needed money. Rancho Bravo could point the way toward new prosperity—and the healing of old wounds—for North and South alike. It was too important to let a man like Weymouth balk it.

So he'd crossed his own Rubicon, joined Gannon, Whitton, and Calhoon, helped them wrench the herd free from Weymouth's grasp, after Calhoon had taken vengeance on Weymouth's son. And on the day those four thousand cattle strung out toward the unknown western lands beyond the Pecos, Philip Killraine had known in his bones that his decision had been the right one.

Gannon was trailboss, Elias guide and peacemaker with the Indians, Calhoon in charge of the herd's defense. Killraine himself had brought to Rancho Bravo what the others lacked: enough money to finance the drive and business sense keen as a bayonet and hard as a wooden nutmeg. It was his responsibility, in addition to his share of work and fighting, to handle all financial affairs of the

enterprise. He'd done that, stretching every nickel to do a dollar's work.

And now, he thought, the drive was almost over, the dream soon to be reality. From the Neuces to San Antonio up to the high plains to the Middle Concho, across the Big Dry, a hundred waterless miles to the Horsehead Crossing of the Pecos. And toiling and fighting all the way, not only against Indians and white men who coveted their herd and tried to take it by force of arms, but against the country itself, against land and weather, storms, stampedes, desert; and always against the cattle themselves, herdbroken, but never really tamed. Whatever fate and nature had thrown at them, they had conquered. Elias had made peace with the Comanches; he and Calhoon now were setting up the ranch in the Big Bend with half the herd. Gannon and Killraine had trailed the rest north, sold a few hundred herd to the army at Fort Sumner for fantastic prices, paid men long-deferred wages, sent the remainder of the money eastward in trusted hands to purchase another herd and get it on the trail. They'd haggled with old Uncle Dick Wooten, the crusty mountain-man who controlled Raton Pass, and Killraine had beat his toll-fee down from two bits a head to a dime. The herd had flowed into Colorado, creating a sensation at the little town of Trinidad, then down the Purgatoire and up the Arkansas. By the time they reached Pueblo, the entrance to the mines, three days hence, the word would surely have already spread, and Killraine hoped buyers would appear in flocks. And that, of course, was when he would come into his own, charged with selling the herd for the highest dollar. On his success or failure hung the whole future of Rancho Bravo. . . .

And maybe, he thought, if he could get a price that would astound them all, that would erase the strange hostility that had grown up against him in Rancho Bravo.

He'd been frank about it with Henry Gannon this afternoon as they rode double toward the wagons.

In the rigidity of Gannon's back, he could sense disgust;

in Gannon's silence, he thought there was anger. Suddenly he had burst out, "All right, damn it, Henry! Let's get it said and over with. I'm tired of this, you understand?"

Gannon reined in. "Tired of what?"

Killraine slid down, faced him. "The 'treatment,' as we used to call it in the army. Oh, I expected it in the beginning, as the only Yankee duck in this flock of Texas geese, but I thought finally I'd proved myself and been accepted. But apparently I was wrong. It's started all over again. First Fanning, then it spread to the others, now it's infected you. I don't give a damn about Carter Fanning, but you're my business partner and, I'd hoped, my friend. And if it's got you, too, we might as well have it out. Maybe I'm no cowhand yet, but I'm not ashamed of my contribution to Rancho Bravo. So what's wrong? Why has everybody suddenly turned against me?"

Gannon stared at him. "Phil, you're imaginin'—"

"No, I'm not. Fanning's tried to make a fool of me every chance he's got, the other men have taken their cue from him, and now you're on their side. And—" he broke off as Gannon's face did not change "—oh, the devil with it. Ride on," he snapped. "I'll walk to the wagons." He turned his back on Gannon, strode away, half sick inside with disappointment.

Then Gannon's horse came up behind him. "Trail fever," Gannon said.

Killraine halted, turned, Henry's face had changed now. There was contrition on it. "What?" Phil asked.

"Trail fever. We used to have it on the drives we made before the war, and they weren't a patch to this one. It happens when a drive's too long, too hard. Too many men cooped together too much, same old faces, same old way all the time. Like sailors that've been at sea without touchin' land for months. People git to where they can't stand the sight of one another, git edgy, raw, take it out on whoever's handy—"

"And as the only outsider in the crowd, I'm the handy one, that it?"

"I hate to say it, but I reckon so." Gannon tipped back

his hat. "We'll all feel better when we finally git there. It's always worse the nearer you git to the trail's end. Then every hour's like a day and every day a year and—you know."

"Maybe. I might even have a touch of it myself. Possibly I have imagined some of it. That still doesn't explain Carter Fanning, though. He seems to have a real grudge and I don't know what it is."

"There's no explaining Carter since he come back from the war. He had a rough time of it and he runs a lot deeper than he used to. I reckon he couldn't explain himself. Phil, forget it; swing up here and we'll ride on in."

Now, watching the sleeping herd, Killraine hooked a leg around his saddle horn, lit a cigar. Trail fever. Yes, that would explain it. He should have recognized it, having seen it himself in men who'd been too long in combat. Well, he'd accept that for now, keep clear of Fanning, exercise self-control. And if it ran deeper than that, if the animosity were real, when he sold the herd he'd have last laugh and make them eat some words. Whatever the market was in Pueblo, he'd use every ounce of brains and business-sense he had to jack it even higher. And when they saw the price he got, there'd be no more looking down their nose at Yankees. Only three more days and his turn would come.

He reined the horse around, mind ticking now with plans. At a walk, he swung on a course that brought him closer to the line of brush along the river. Then he pulled up his mount abruptly, freezing in the saddle, head cocked, breath held.

It came again, the crackling of wood, snapping of dried branches from the thicket along the river, two hundred yards away, as if something big and heavy were blundering through a windfall in the dark.

Then it ceased and once more the night was still, save for the murmur of the water, the blatting of a calf somewhere in the herd.

It could have been an elk or buffalo. Maybe a stray

longhorn from the herd. Certainly it was not an Indian. But, something was down there in the brush, and he had to find out what.

Philip Killraine drew his rifle from the saddle scabbard, turned the horse, and put it at a walk toward the woods along the river.

He had not covered half the distance to the thicket when a stick in there popped with the loudness of a shot. Then a human voice said, "Damn!"

Killraine jerked up the rifle. There was a man down there—a white one. And there was nothing that could mean but cattle thieves. All along, this herd had drawn them like buzzards to a carcass, and if another gang meant to make a try, this was their last chance before Pueblo.

Dismounting, he ground-reined the horse. The smart thing to do, of course, was to ride to the wagon, summon help. But tonight he was not in the mood to do the smart thing. He'd had too much: the incident with Carter Fanning, Gannon's coolness. . . . His pride demanded that at least he first make a reconnaissance.

The ground sloped sharply toward the woods. Confident that its angle kept him off the skyline, Killraine, crouching, made a zig-zagging dash across the open, fetched up in the shadow of a big cottonwood at the thicket's edge. There, listening, again he caught a wisp of sound, not a cracking stick, but the whip of brush as someone scrambled through it. He frowned. If this were a rustler, it was the world's most inept and clumsy one.

Still, it could be a trick of some kind, bait to draw him off. When you had commanded men in combat as long as Philip Killraine had, you took no chances. Edging into the brush, he followed a course that would swing him in an arc, bringing him up behind the source of that sound.

Threading through scrub willow, alder, wild rose, and cane, he tried to remember everything he had learned from the Indian-trained Elias Whitton. The first rule was that to be impatient was to die. He took his time, searching with his toe before putting down each foot, silently

freeing himself from clawing briars, pausing every few feet to look and listen.

The darkness here beneath the trees was nearly absolute. As he neared the river, again he heard a muffled curse from somewhere ahead. Taking a fix on it, he edged forward, keeping under cover. Then he halted once more, and, in amazement, stood up straight.

The sound came from only a few yards away—a strange, sobbing whimpering, almost like that of a badly wounded dog. The short hair prickled on the back of Killraine's neck. Carefully, he moved forward, hands sweating on the rifle.

Reaching the edge of a clump of brush, he stopped. Here by the river the woods opened out; a silver scatter of moonlight filtered through the foliage of the cottonwoods. And on a pile of sand riffled by past high water, a man lay face down, and the whimpering came from him.

Killraine hesitated, then raised and aimed the gun. If this were a trick, it was part of a scheme beyond his imagining.

His voice was sharp, commanding. "All right. You, there, you're covered. Don't move. I'll kill you if you do."

The whimpering ceased, the body stirred.

"I said, don't move!" Killraine barked. "Who are you? Are you alone?"

There was no answer; but the whimpering began again.

Killraine made his decision. Half a minute more and he stood over the prone figure with his rifle pointed at its head.

"All right, who are you?"

"I'm hurtin'— Jeez." There was no mistaking the agony in the whispered voice. Killraine lowered the gun a fraction. "Hurting? Indians?"

"No, I— Oh, Gawd, my back. . . ."

Instinctively, Killraine bent and touched the man between the shoulder blades. When he did, the body jerked. "No! No, jeez, no!"

Killraine stepped back. "All right. On your feet, then."

"I can't . . . I can't go no more." Slowly, doubling with

pain, the man rolled over. His face came into the moonlight, and Killraine stared.

Beneath matted sandy hair, it was like a skull, cheeks drawn, eyes sunken, skin blistered raw by sun. Killraine frowned. This was nothing but a boy, not over eighteen at the very most.

"Mister—" the young man croaked and tried to rise. He almost made it to his knees, fell back. Phil put aside all thought of danger, laid down the rifle.

"All right," he said, voice gentle now. "Take it easy. What's wrong with you?"

"They whipped me," the boy blubbered weakly. "They whipped me a hundred lashes and I couldn't stand it. . . ."

"Whipped?" Phil found his block of sulphur matches, struck one. As its light flared high, he gasped. The boy's back was a horror, tattered shirt plastered by blood, sand, and dirt to oozing flesh from neck to waistline. "Who whipped you?" he whispered, full of outrage. "Indians? Comanches, Kiowas?"

"No." Weakly, the boy shook his head. "No, it wasn't them. It was Lieutenant Cross. It was the army."

The river made a cold, purling sound. Circling the herd, a rider was singing "Dixie" in a high, clear voice.

"The army," Killraine said, blankly, after a moment. Surely the boy hallucinated. "What's this you say about the army?"

The youth's panting was loud in the stillness of the lowlands. "A hundred lashes—Lieutenant Cross and Major Hopper. I lost two cartridges I couldn't account for. The Major had 'em stake me out on the parade ground for half a day. Jeez, it was awful. . . ." Killraine recognized the accent now; pure New York City slum, bitingly sharp and nasal. "When they let me up . . . I hit him."

"Wait a minute—" Killraine began, but now words were pouring out.

"So he had Cross give me a hundred lashes. Tied me to the flagpole, called out th' whole command to watch. . . .

I musta gone out after the first ten or twenty. . . . Somebody helped me. . . . Anyhow, I got away. Now I got to get to Denver, got to git to Jenny—"

"Hold on," Killraine said. "Where'd all this happen?"

"Sedgwick. Fort Sedgwick. . . ."

"Hell." The match burned Killraine's fingers; he struck another one, making no sense of this. Fort Sedgwick was hundreds of miles away, in the northeast corner of the territory. And Denver? The boy was far off course. But one thing sank in.

"You're a soldier," Killraine said.

"Not any more. Won't go back. Never."

Killraine said quietly, "Then you're a deserter."

"Just know I ain't goin' back. Got to git to Jenny—got to have some help."

"Yes, surely, you're in bad shape." Killraine put out the match, thrust unanswered questions into a corner of his mind. "All right, I'll give you a hand. We're a cattle outfit and our camp's not far away. Easy does it—what's your name?"

"Wallace, Dick Wallace." He groaned as Killraine, with strength and gentleness, helped him to his feet. Erect, he was tall, emaciated, and hardly able to move his legs as the older man, supporting him, led him toward open land.

The ground-reined horse was where Killraine had left it, a few yards away. "You can ride?" Phil asked.

"Yeah, horse soldier. . . ." But it took all of Killraine's strength to get him in the saddle without hurting him more than necessary. Slumping, Wallace clung to the horn as Killraine swung up behind. And as they rode toward the wagons, Killraine shook his head. Somebody had whipped this boy, and savagely. But he did not for one moment think it could have been an officer at Fort Sedgwick. Wallace was lying. But then, Killraine thought, mouth twisting, deserters always did.

Gannon took his turn at night-guard like all the rest, and he and Fanning and two other men were hunkered at

the fire drinking coffee before riding out, when Killraine's horse walked into camp. Seeing Wallace, Gannon straightened up, hitching at his guns. "What the hell?"

Swinging down, Killraine helped Wallace from the saddle, and the boy collapsed beside the fire. "I found him in the brush along the Arkansas. I think he's a deserter from the army. Anyway, he's got a wild story. . . ." At that moment the fire flared, casting yellow light on Wallace's back.

"Judas Priest!" Fanning blurted. "Sioux git him, or Cheyennes?"

"I don't know," Killraine answered tersely.

Gannon and the others stared down at Wallace's back. In the better light, it was worse than Killraine had thought, a dirty mass of chopped, suppurating flesh. "Somebody has beat the livin' hell out of him with a bull whip," Gannon rasped. Then as Wallace looked up, he frowned. "Lord God, it ain't nothin' but a kid." He came to life at once. "Carter, git some biscuits from the wagon. Here young feller, drink this." He passed Wallace his own coffee cup.

Wallace took it with trembling hands, drank greedily, making an animal, smacking noise. "More," he whispered, when the cup was empty. Gannon poured it as Fanning came with a handful of cold bread. Wallace nearly snatched it from him, cramming it into his mouth as if starved. He washed it down with coffee, sighed, fell back. "Jeez, that was good."

"Now," Gannon said, "who are you? Where you from? Who laid those on you?"

Wallace's voice was a little stronger, but not much. "I told this man . . . Major Hopper at Ford Sedgwick. Lieutenant Cross, the adjutant . . . spread-eagled me for losin' a couple of rounds at target practice. Half a day in th' sun, bugs in my eyes and mouth, nearly ate me up . . . and Hopper laughin' when they let me up . . . I hit him. Then he and Cross tie me to the flagpole, give me a hundred with a teamster's whip. . . . Passed out, don't remember how I got away. Some civilians there, was sorry for me. . . . Think they hid me in a wagon, sneaked me

out . . . but they had to dump me when a patrol come lookin'. . . . They give me grub, water, a few matches. After that, I walked. Think I found a dead buffalo, ate some of that. . . . Can't remember much, just walkin', walkin', got to git to Denver . . . find Jenny, she'll hide me. Because I ain't goin' back, you hear? Nobody can make me go back there!" He closed his eyes, rolled over with his head on his arm.

Carter Fanning looked down at him, and the firelight playing on his face revealed a strange, almost mournful expression. But when he raised his head, his white teeth were bared and his eyes glittered. "The good old Yankee army, huh, *Mister* Killraine?" He bit off each word. "Run out of Confederates and now it's like a bitch wolf starving —eats it own whelps!"

Killraine looked at him, then at the others. "Listen all of you," he said. "This man's story's open to serious question. I've no doubt he's a deserter, but as for who gave him the whipping, I think he's lying. That kind of punishment's been prohibited in the service since before the war. No officer would dare to treat a man like that. He'd be a fool to; he'd have to face a court-martial and it would cost him his commission!"

"I tell you it was Major Hopper!" Wallace groaned. "Him and Cross!"

Killraine shook his head. "We'll get the straight of it later. Right now, that back needs attention." Other men were waking up now as he turned his back on Fanning, went to the wagons. He returned with a blanket, a pan, a cloth, and a bottle of whiskey from the medicinal supply. Handing the whiskey to Fanning, he said, "Get some of this in him. Henry, build up the fire." He spread the blanket, laid Wallace face down on it, then went to fill the pan with water.

While it heated, he rolled up his sleeves and watched as Fanning, with a gentleness which Killraine had never suspected in him, helped Wallace sit up, cradling the boy's matted head in his lap. "All right, young feller. Take a long slug. This will do you good and help you, too." He held the bottle to the youth's mouth.

Wallace drank, spluttered, shoved it away. "More," Fanning said. "You're gonna need a lot. It's the only thing we got to kill the pain. Now, easy, don't fight it, just let it run down. . . ."

But Wallace was staring at the Bowie Killraine was heating in the fire. "Mister, you ain't—"

"That proud flesh on your back's got to be debrided."

"Jest drink," Fanning whispered. "We'll git you good and drunk and you won't feel a thing. Don't worry, I won't let him hurt you."

The boy drank again, and then again. Presently Fanning put the bottle aside. "That ought to be enough, Killraine," he said, easing Wallace down on his face. "Go ahead with your rat-killin'."

Killraine washed down shirt and flesh both with warm water, then half peeled, half cut away the fabric. The gathered men made a general growl of revulsion at what was thus revealed.

Hardly any skin was visible from neck to waistband; it had been chopped and driven into the welter of raw flesh, in some places scabbed, in others oozing. Killraine tried to close his nostrils against a sudden stink, and hot bile rose in his throat as he saw the small, fat, white squirming things embedded in the wounds. "Maggots," he said thickly.

"What?" Jerking from his torpor, Wallace raised his head, eyes rolling.

"Easy," Fanning soothed him. "We'll git 'em out. Anyway, be glad you got 'em. They eat away the rotten flesh and clean the wounds."

"Maggots—oh, Gawd." Wallace laid his face on his arm, trembling all over.

Killraine cut away the belt and pants, shaking his head. No one in that condition could cover two hundred miles of prairie, eluding Indians and the patrols that doubtless sought him—not without a streak of rawhide toughness Wallace had not displayed. His conviction that the boy was lying strengthened.

Gannon held a lantern as Killraine sluiced away dried blood, pus, and matter, then delicately and meticulously

used the knife to open pustules, scrape away rotten flesh, pry fat maggots from their obscene feeding ground. All the while Fanning steadied Wallace, holding his hand, talking gently to him, like a mother to a child.

Presently that phase of it was over, fresh blood running now to cleanse the wounds and carry away the infection. Killraine rocked back on his heels and waited. Wallace made formless sounds, mouth muffled on his arm. After several minutes, Killraine mopped the back and the abused buttocks clean again. "Hand me that whiskey."

When Fanning passed it over, he doused the wounds with the rest of the bottle's contents, using it as disinfectant. Wallace squirmed and cursed in foul New York gutter jargon.

"Now just hang on, bud," Fanning told him. "I've seen some doctors would pour them stripes full of gunpowder and set fire to it to cauterize the wounds."

When the whiskey dried, Killraine smeared on a special salve Elias Whitton compounded out of tallow, pine tar, and herbs to a Comanche formula which had proved effective on man and beast. Then he arose, hands bloody to the wrists. "That's it." He ground a maggot that had missed the fire into the dust with his boot heel. "A loose shirt and pants big enough not to bind him ought to be better than bandages."

"I got some spares," Fanning said between his teeth. "He can have 'em."

"Good. Then put him in the wagon." Trembling slightly with reaction from the exacting, unwholesome task, Killraine, holding hands and knife well out to the side, turned away. The cook gave him soft lye soap and he went down to the little tributary of the Arkansas flowing past the camp to wash.

Kneeling there in the darkness, he was still puzzled by Fanning's unexpected gentleness. Of course, he had known men in the army with an unnatural affection for boys, and he supposed there must be some Texans like that, but so far he had not encountered any, and Fanning was the last man he would suspect of such a thing.

No, he thought, finally clean and lighting a well-earned cigar, not likely. Of course, Fanning obviously hated anything Northern, and the boy's wild story was a handy tool for him to use against Killraine and the U.S. Army. . . .

Savoring the smoke, Killraine was thoughtful. In some ways even Elias Whitton, though he was black, had it easier with these Texans than himself. At least they were shaped by the same environment, knew one another's ways and customs; and Elias was an expert cowman. Nor had he ever fought against these men; they had no reason to wonder secretly if *he* were the one who, on some distant battlefield, had fired the shot that had killed friend or brother.

He missed Elias, Killraine thought. But most of all, he missed Loosh Calhoon, his brother-in-law. Loosh was Southern too, but with his vengeance on Gordon Weymouth, his marriage to Evelyn, he had purged himself of all lingering hatred of his former enemies. He had Loosh's respect and trust, he was sure and Elias's. He could only hope, without being certain, that he had Gannon's.

And almost as if he had summoned Henry with the thought, Gannon was there, a tall, bowlegged silhouette on the creekbank. "Got to scrub down, too." He knelt, washed. Standing up, shaking water from his hands, he said, "You did a good job on that boy."

"Thanks." Killraine felt more warmth than merited by the words: compliments from Henry had been few and far between of late. "Thank Fanning too. It would have been damned rough if he hadn't kept Wallace quiet."

"Yeah, he was good with the boy." Henry took out tobacco, began to roll a cigarette. "Phil, what do you think about his story?"

"I told you, it's a lot of wind. No officer would dare whip an enlisted man like that in this day and time."

"Then who the hell did?"

"I don't know. But we'll get the straight of that when we turn him over to the authorities."

Gannon did not answer. He put the cigarette between his lips, found a match. He lit it, drew in smoke and took it from his lips. "Who said we would?"

Phil stiffened, and the warmth drained from him. "I say it, Henry." Before Gannon could speak, he went on swiftly. "We have no choice. The boy's a self-confessed deserter, and when we get to Pueblo we have to remit him to the custody of the law."

"Remit him to. . . ." Gannon's face was hard as he inhaled and the end of his cigarette glowed. "For what? So they can spread-eagle him again and whip him some more and put him in jail for twenty years? Phil, there's something you got to understand—"

"I understand he's a deserter."

"From the *Union* Army," Gannon said. "It's your army, yeah, but it ain't ours, and you see what it's done to him. Phil, there ain't a man in this outfit would stand for you givin' him back to them."

Killraine drew in breath. "Including you?"

"Including me," Gannon said. "I fought 'em, too. They killed my brother. The defeat broke my old man's heart and killed him. Josh Weymouth, the great Union sympathizer, did his best to break up Rancho Bravo and kill me and Loosh and 'Lias and anybody else he could. You wasn't with us when we fought the real battles against his gunmen."

"No, but I cleaned up the mess behind you. I've taken my share of risks on this drive, and paid my way, and I'll more than pay it in Pueblo when I sell the herd." He broke off. "Henry, you've got to understand. It's not your army, but it's mine. And even though I'm out of it, I still feel an obligation. I owe it—and my country—more than I can ever pay. And I say, this man's a confessed deserter, and he must be returned to his unit."

"What?" a voice cut in from darkness. "You'll play hell doing that, Killraine!" Both men turned to see Carter Fanning emerge into moonlight a yard or two away.

Killraine fought to hold his temper. "Fanning, I'm afraid this is none of your affair. It's a conference of owners."

"And I'm an owner, too, with three hundred head in the herd." Fanning stepped forward, thumbs hooked in belt. "And when those are sold, I'll have money to burn.

So I'm telling you, Killraine, forget it. I'll see to the kid; I can afford it then."

"And I'm telling you," Killraine said wearily, "it doesn't work that way."

"Oh? Why not?" Fanning spoke the words, but Phil could feel Gannon's eyes on him as well.

"For this reason," he answered, voice crackling. "Rancho Bravo will neither harbor a deserter nor help one escape."

"That's not your decision to make," Gannon said.

"I think it is." Killraine turned on him. "Under our agreement, I'm totally responsible for the financial aspects of Rancho Bravo. We sold the army five hundred head at Sumner, and when it comes back west in strength, it'll be one of our prime markets. But if the word gets around that Rancho Bravo is a sanctuary for any deserter who feels the army has abused him, our name will be mud with its buyers. And by next year we'll have competition, plenty of it. We've got to keep the army as a market, and I'll not see us lose it over one scrawny, lying recruit. It's my responsibility to protect our markets and I'm asserting it."

When Henry did not answer, Killraine knew the thought had not occurred to him, and that he was impressed by its truth. "Besides," Phil added, "after more than ten years in the army, if there's one thing I despise, it's a deserter. Call it personal if you want to, but I'll have no part of Rancho Bravo or any other outfit that helps one escape."

"Well, then, maybe we'd better settle this right here," Fanning said, taking another forward step. "Because I won't see that kid go back." His right hand dropped to his side, and his holster was filled now. "Killraine—"

But Gannon stepped between them. "Enough," he said. "Slack off, Carter, hear me? Or you want to fight me, too?"

Fanning stared at him. "Henry—"

"I don't like it any better'n you. But Phil's right. It *will* cost us army markets and it *is* his decision. So, if that's

the way he wants it, the boy goes back to Sedgwick after we sell the herd."

Fanning looked at Gannon for a moment. Then his body slacked. "All right," he said. "I can't fight you because you're the boss and Killraine is another and I promised to take your orders until the herd is sold. But after that I don't owe Rancho Bravo one goddamned thing, I'm on my own." He turned to Killraine.

"And, *Mister* Killraine," he said, softly, icily, "I'll kill the man that tries to send that boy back to the goddamned Yankee army. Remember that." Abruptly, he turned and walked back toward the fire.

Both men watched him go. Then, full of anger and foreboding, Killraine turned to Gannon. "Henry, I want a guard posed over Wallace. I'll not have anyone hustling him away before we reach Pueblo."

Gannon was silent for half a minute. Then he dropped his cigarette and ground it out. "Your word is law," he said bitterly. "I'll see to it. Now, I'm overdue on guard." And he turned and walked away, leaving Killraine alone in the darkness by the stream.

3

Next morning, as he had guessed they would, they began to come—the cattle buyers. And when they did, everything else was erased from Philip Killraine's mind.

The first one appeared at daybreak as the herd moved out, a dark blot in the distance, a horseman riding hard. Gannon's whistle brought Killraine to the point, and together they watched him come, spotting him immediately through Gannon's pocket-telescope for what he was by his town clothes and awkward seat. Gannon was for riding out to meet him; Killraine held him back. "Let them come to us—always," he told Henry.

Nevertheless, the interval until the man drew up before them seemed endless. They were, Phil thought, like treasure-hunters who had dug for months and whose shovels had finally hit an iron box. The waiting to find out what it contained—gold, silver, or only lead and brass—was agonizing.

The man was in his forties, with black hair and gray-streaked beard. He had nearly killed his mount, but what was a single horse stacked up against first chance to buy the Rancho Bravo herd? Shrewd black eyes flickered with awe and greed as they ranged over the great snake of cattle strung out behind the Rancho Bravo owners. Then, breathlessly: "Gentlemen, Conroy's my name, Laird Conroy. Livestock's my business, buy and sell, cash on the barrelhead, references Bank of Pueblo, Wells-Fargo, Denver; any others you might need." The words sprayed like buckshot. "Do I have the honor of addressing the owners of this fine herd?"

"You do." Killraine introduced himself and Gannon. Conroy, shifting nervously in the saddle, looked back over his shoulder, as if fearing pursuit. Then he shook their hands and immediately unlashed saddlebags from behind his cantle, opened them. Gannon let out a breath of awe at the sight of the fat, bound sheaves of greenbacks in their pockets.

"Gentlemen, I know you've come a long way, and it's not been easy. You've a right to expect the reward you've earned, top price for your beef. I'm not a man to beat around the bush or play a penny-ante game. So I've set my sights high, right up to the highest notch. Seventy dollars a head, gentlemen, for everything you've got in that

herd that walks on hoofs, a tally in Pueblo or right this minute. A handshake will seal the deal and these saddlebags are yours—twenty-five thousand in U.S. Gold Certificates and the rest payable in Pueblo in paper money, specie, or gold dust, as you please. Laird Conroy always pays top dollars, shoots square, ask anybody in Colorado Territory. It's a pleasure to do business with you." He held out his right hand toward Killraine for a shake, proffered the saddlebags to Henry with his left.

Gannon made a sound, half-reached for them, but chuckling, Killraine touched his arm. Triumph burned in him like wine. The treasure chest was open now, and it contained a fortune. If the first bid was seventy, the final would be at least twenty more, and maybe more than that. "Sorry, Mr. Conroy. The herd's not for sale."

"Not—" Conroy's jaw dropped and Gannon made a strangled sound.

"Not until we reach Pueblo," Killraine continued casually. "Once we're there, offers from all interested parties will be given full consideration."

"Mr. Killraine. . . ." Conroy's face was red. "I advise you to deal with me now, and promptly. I'm a reputable buyer, one of the few in this end of Colorado. And you must understand that if you wait until you reach Pueblo, you'll be overwhelmed by all sorts of confidence-men and fly-by-nights who have no object but to take you into camp."

"That's a chance we have to take," Killraine replied, without concern.

Conroy forced a lopsided smile. "Very well, Mr. Killraine. Obviously you're a shrewd businessman. It leaves me very little margin, but as an inducement to you to deal here and now, I'll stretch myself to the limit. Seventy-five dollars a head. Take it or leave it, here and now, that's the way I do business."

Gannon, fingering his coiled lasso, whistled soundlessly, freckles blotched against his pale face. Killraine shook his head. "Sorry, Mr. Conroy. That's not *my* way of doing business. In Pueblo—"

"Pueblo!" exploded Conroy. "How many cattle buyers do you think there are out here with capital to buy your herd? I assure you, I'm really the only one—"

But Killraine's gaze was fastened on something beyond him. "Then I suppose those two coming now are impostors."

"What?" Conroy jerked the lathered horse around. "Jesus!" he blurted disgustedly.

Another pair of riders crested the horizon, pounding toward the herd, obviously, racing one another. Conroy shaded his eyes. "Fielding and Dunaway," he said disparagingly. "Both small-time, tinhorn operators. Mr. Killraine you don't want to deal with men like them. . . ."

"I think I just explained that I'm not dealing with anyone out here. You gentlemen are welcome to look the herd over to your satisfaction, make a rough tally—though we'll furnish a certified one later on—and amuse yourselves as you please, so long as you cause no stampedes or trouble with the cattle. But I will entertain no offers until we reach the town, and it will do you no good to make any."

"But—" Then Conroy read the resolution in Killraine's eyes and his shoulders slumped and he grinned ruefully. "As you say. But remember, I was here first. You are not an easy mark, Mr. Killraine." With resignation, he closed the saddlebags.

"No," Killraine said. "I didn't come this far to be one." Then he and Gannon rode forward to meet the next two buyers.

For the next five hours, Philip Killraine was in his glory. No sooner had Fielding and Dunaway, eyeing each other and Conroy with suspicion, introduced themselves than a buckboard drawn by a hard-whipped team appeared. After that a buggy, then another man on horseback. . . . And then, as the sun rose higher, they came in a steady stream, not only from Pueblo, but from Denver, and from other places Killraine had never heard of—the mining camps back in the Rockies: Golden City, Canon City. . . . Like ants drawn to a smear of honey, they

swarmed around the herd, while Killraine circulated among them, cordial, affable, and hard as granite, ears tuned to catch every nuance of gossip, his brain ticking off and filing every offer and its source. To all of them, without exception, he gave the same answer: the herd was not for sale until it reached Pueblo.

When the sun reached zenith, they stopped for nooning, an unaccustomed luxury; but Gannon wanted the cattle fat and sleek when they were sold. He, Killraine, Carter Fanning, and two other Rancho Bravo men who owned stock in the herd conferred privately in the shade of the bed wagon.

"Well, gentlemen, there's no doubt about it," Killraine said, voice vibrant with excitement. "The market's here—richer, fatter, then we dared hope. By the time we reach Pueblo and these buyers have stewed in their own juices for a while, the price will be sky-high! They swear nobody would pay such a price, but I'm confident we'll better a hundred iron men a head!"

Gannon whistled; so did Bledsoe and Ryan, who held slightly more than a hundred head apiece. Killraine's eyes shifted to Fanning, hoping to see similar gratification there, hoping that the promise of such riches would erase his animosity. Instead, Fanning arose, tall and gaunt in his dirty shirt and shotgun chaps, and his eyes were like coals in his dark, lean face. "What's the best price anybody's offered today, Killraine?"

"Eighty-five. But don't worry, that's—"

"Then I'd like to sell my stock right now," Fanning said.

Killraine's jaw dropped, and there was silence as Gannon, Bledsoe, and Ryan stared. Then Ryan said, "Carter, you gone crazy? Didn't Mr. Killraine just say—You'd be throwin' near five thousand dollars out the window!"

"That's all right," Fanning answered, eyes fixed on Killraine. "They belong to me and I can do that if I please to. Killraine, I want to sell today. I'll take eighty-five, if you'll show me the buyer. . . ."

Philip Killraine did not answer at once. But as Fanning

faced him defiantly, all at once he understood, and his mouth thinned beneath the moustaches. "It wouldn't help you any, Fanning. I'm still going to take the boy back to Sedgwick."

"That's somethin' to be settled when I've got the money for my stock and I'm no longer part of Rancho Bravo. And the quicker I git the money, the quicker we can settle it." He took a single step toward Killraine, halted, and Phil could feel the irrational anger, hatred, radiating from him, and knew this man was near flash point. Slowly, very slowly and unobtrusively, he let his right hand shift position, closer to his gun, without ever taking his eyes from Fanning.

Then, once again, Gannon was between them, facing the Texan. "You'll settle it in Pueblo and no sooner, Carter," he said, voice mild, but with a ring of iron deep underneath. "Unless you want to settle it with me."

"Henry, I don't want to— All I want's the money for my stock, now."

"No," said Gannon. "The deal was, this herd's sold all together and Phil has got the whip on sellin' it. We start breakin' off little chunks, that drives the price down for all the rest. Besides, we ain't takin' time to cut out your stock now." He paused. "You made a bargain with us and I expect you to keep it. The rest is up to Killraine."

Fanning did not answer. Presently, Henry said, gently: "Well?"

"No." Fanning relaxed. "No, it ain't your ass I want, Henry. I got no grudge against you."

"I don't see where you got one against anybody."

"What you see and what I see's two different things. But . . . all right. Pueblo. On your account, Henry, not his." Fanning wheeled and walked away, and Killraine felt intense relief. He had not been afraid of Fanning, but he did not want to die uselessly in such a foolish quarrel, nor did he want to kill another man. Even after all the combat he'd been in, or perhaps because of it, killing another human was not something Philip Killraine looked on lightly.

Gannon watched him go, shaking his head slightly.

"Trail fever," he said. "Trail fever, pure and simple. He's worked like a bastard every foot of the way; now he's about played out. Maybe he'll be better in Pueblo, maybe not." He turned to Killraine. "Either way, you got to watch him. If it don't git better and you try to take that boy back to Sedgwick, he'll brace you, sure. Phil, maybe you'd better reconsider."

"It's out of the question," Killraine said.

Gannon's lips pressed together. "Well," he said at last, reluctantly, "I'll side you as best I can. But we can't always be together. . . ."

Killraine's temper slipped a notch. "Don't strain yourself, Henry."

"You're a partner in Rancho Bravo. I keep my bargains, too," Gannon answered tonelessly.

"Even if you don't want to."

"That has nothing to do with it," Gannon said. Then, harshly, he snapped at Ryan and Bledsoe, "All right, on your feet! We've had our rest! Let's go to work and get this herd moved out!"

When they had gone, Killraine leaned against the wagon wheel a moment, stroking his moustache, sure sign that inwardly he was seething. Damn it, today should have been one of the high points of his life. Now it was half-ruined. If only he'd been on a different side of the herd last night, if only Wallace had blundered to the river five miles upstream or down. . . .

But he hadn't, and Killraine's decision had been made and was unalterable. With sudden resolution, he went to the tailgate of the bedwagon, hoisted himself inside.

It was hot in here, stinking of stale bedding and Wallace's wounded back. The armed guard Gannon had detailed to watch the boy drowsed against a roll of blankets, rifle across his lap. Dick Wallace lay face down, half asleep on a pile of blankets. Irene Gannon sat near him, sponging his face with a damp cloth.

"Morse, leave us for a minute, if you please," Phil told the guard. Glad to be relieved, the man climbed promptly out.

"Would you like for me to leave, too, Phil?" asked Henry Gannon's wife.

Blond and lovely, she was an Englishwoman and even more a stranger to the West than himself. Her first husband had been an Austrian nobleman who'd fought in Mexico with Maximilian in the combined French and Austrian effort to conquer the country for the French crown. Following Baron von Gerstein to Mexico, she'd been captured by Lipan Apaches, had escaped, and been picked up dazed and wandering on the Texas high plains by Henry Gannon and Elias Whitton. Her husband had come to take her back, but so had the Apaches, and they had killed the Austrian in a battle for her. Henry had saved her from the Lipans then, and she'd stayed with the drive. The two of them had fallen in love and been married at Fort Sumner; now she was part of Rancho Bravo too, and maybe, Killraine thought, a no more unlikely part than himself. "No," he answered. "I see no reason for you to. How is he? Can he stand some talking?"

"His fever's quite high, but I should think so."

Killraine sat down on a bedroll. "Wallace. Wallace, this is Captain—This is Mr. Killraine. Listen to me. I want to hear your story again. All of it, this time."

Wallace stirred, but could not roll over because of his back. "Yes, sir," he said groggily, at last. "I'll try. . . ."

Irene mopped his face continually, as sweat streamed down its skull-like contours. His voice was weak, salted with gutter oaths he hardly knew he spoke. "Me and Jenny, you understand—"

"Jenny?"

"I told you, she's my sister. She had this rotten job in a sweatshop on the West Side. All day long on that goddam sewin' machine, and I couldn't git a job and she didn't make enough for two of us. I was afraid . . . I was afraid somethin' was goin' to happen to her, you understand? I had to get off her neck before it did, so when I saw this poster, Join the Army, I thought, anyhow they'll pay me, and then she's free and she won't be forced to. . . ." He broke off, lay panting for a moment.

"So I signed on," he continued, weakly, disjointedly.

"Four-year hitch . . . that was seven, eight months ago. Tried to be a good soldier, but never really could learn t'ride, you see? Best shot in squadron, but never got over bein' scared of horses. . . ."

Killraine shook his head. In his day, such a man would never have been accepted in the first place, but the cavalry was desperate for warm bodies now. . . .

"But managed to get along, 'til Hopper come to Sedgwick, him and Cross. . . . And tough, oh, my ass, they was tough! And I had trouble with my horse on mounted parade one time when General Sheridan himself was out there for inspection, and I near fell off, and after that, it was hell. They made sure I couldn't do nothin' right, and when I lost those two cartridges, they staked me out . . ."

Sweat ran down his face as he panted for a moment; his eyes were glazed, unfocused. "And Jenny's in Denver now, you see? I bitched it, I bitched it all. And I got to get to Denver. I got to find her and save her—"

"From what? I thought you wanted her to save you."

The boy turned his face away. "I just bitched it for her. That's what's so awful." Then he dropped his head.

"Wallace—" But Irene motioned Killraine to silence.

She bathed the boy's face while Killraine waited. "Not much more," she cautioned.

Killraine nodded, puzzled by the way the boy stuck to his story. Incredible as it seemed, was it possible he told the truth? Well, there was a sure way to find out.

"All right, Wallace. Maybe we can help you. But one thing we can't do is hide you out. We've got to deliver you back to Sedgwick—and it's for your own good. As a deserter, you'll be an outlaw, and whatever trouble your sister's in, you can't help her that way. Sooner or later they're bound to catch you, and then you'll rot in a stockade. . . .

"On the other hand, if there's truth in your story at all, you've been the victim of a damned outrage and you're entitled to justice. So I'll make this deal with you. After we've sold the herd, I'll take you back to Sedgwick personally. I'll investigate this matter, and I assure you that if your story's true, Hell itself won't be hot enough to

hold the men who spread-eagled you and whipped you. But nothing can be done about them without your going back."

"No. No, for God's sake, they'll kill me—"

"I guarantee they won't," said Killraine harshly.

The boy did not answer, and his eyes were closed. "Phil," said Irene, "that's enough. He's exhausted. Let him rest."

"Of course. I'll wait until he's stronger. There's time." Killraine swung out of the wagon and gave Morse, waiting there, orders to take up his post again.

Leaning against the tailgate, he chewed an unlit cigar ferociously, feeling for the first time the pangs of doubt.Were the ex-Confederates of Rancho Bravo right, and was he wrong? Had the army whose uniform he'd worn so long really become corrupt, no longer purified by war, but rotting away in peacetime? For that matter, who was he to judge Dick Wallace? Maybe, in a way, he was a deserter, too; hadn't he also quit when the going got rough and the duty demanded of him went against his grain? Resigning his commission had been simple—but an enlisted man was trapped, had to serve his term or buy himself out, which for the remainder of a three-year hitch was bound to run into far more money than a thirteen-dollar-a-month private soldier whose sister worked in a New York sweatshop would ever see in one hunk. So what alternative had the boy but to run to save his life?

Killraine bit down hard on the cigar. Well, he would get the straight of this; it was something he owed not only Wallace but himself and the U.S. Army, too, for that matter. It had to be cleared up, and once the herd was sold, that came, so far as he was concerned, before anything else, even returning to the new Rancho Bravo in Big Bend.

The sound of hoofbeats brought him around. Three more buyers were galloping into camp. For the moment, he put Dick Wallace from his mind and went to meet them.

4

On a luminous afternoon in the middle of September, 1866, the Rancho Bravo herd, a great snake of multi-colored, longhorn cattle, waxy fat from lush prairie grass, well watered from abundant mountain-drainage, every animal in prime shape, reached Pueblo, Colorado Territory—trail's end.

Killraine and Gannon were the first to see the town.

Riding ahead of the point, they crested a swell of land, and it lay before them, where Fountain Creek joined the Arkansas: a scatter of drab, ugly buildings in the distance, made even uglier by contrast with the magnificence of the setting. For behind it, seeming almost pasted against the sky, slopes gilded with rays of lowering sun, rose the Rockies—the Shining Mountains of the Indians.

Both men pulled up their horses, stared. Philip Killraine had seen New York, Chicago, Washington, and other great cities in the East. Having traveled abroad, he knew London and Paris as well. But in this moment of achievement, this was the greatest, finest city he had ever seen. The long drive was over, the dream sublime reality; and they were rich.

He swallowed hard. But that was not the point. The point was that a new chapter had been written in the history of the West and of the nation. The point was that

they had accomplished something so hard and dangerous that no one had dared it before; but now that they had shown the way, it would be done again—and over and over for years to come. And that would make a difference: to North and South alike, to his country, maybe someday even to the world. And the last regret at having left the army fled Killraine's conscience. Nothing he could have done in uniform would have served his country as effectively as the part he'd played in making Rancho Bravo real. He looked at Gannon.

Straight as a ramrod in the saddle, Henry was as motionless as something carved. His face was pale beneath the dust, his nostrils flaring, his eyes wide and shining. After all, in the beginning this had been his dream alone.

But he had shared it, and others had striven, sacrificed, and some had given their very lives for it and lay buried between the Neuces and the Pecos in unmarked graves already obliterated forever by blowing wind and drifting dust. Killraine was a godfearing man who believed in good and evil and an afterlife. He hoped the men who had died for Rancho Bravo could somehow even now share this victory.

Then Gannon made a sound in his throat. He turned in the saddle, a slow, broad smile spreading across his face, and his eyes glistened when their gaze met Phil's. Gannon put out his hand.

"Well, we made it," he said quietly.

"Yes," Killraine said, gripping Gannon's hand. "It looks that way."

They sat there a moment longer. Then Gannon said, "You ride on down. I'll see to the herd. The men will run it if I don't watch out, and we don't want that. Find us a place to bed 'em, and we'll be there by dark." Then he turned his mount and loped it back along the vast river of plodding cattle, the heat and dust and stink and beauty that was the Rancho Bravo drive.

5

Evelyn Killraine and Lucius Calhoon had been married months before, when the drive had halted at San Antonio. At her brother's and husband's insistence, she had taken the stagecoach from there under army escort, and had made her way west to Denver. She was in Pueblo when the Rancho Bravo herd arrived and had already rented a suite and rooms in the best hotel in town. There, while the town outside went crazy, celebrating the herd's arrival, she and Phil were reunited.

Like Phil, she had auburn hair, dark eyes, and, Killraine thought, she looked radiant and lovely, despite her disappointment that Loosh was not with the herd. But she had a streak of practicality and a dedication to Rancho Bravo that matched Killraine's own, and she understood. "Loosh was right. Elias needed him. A black man alone couldn't manage those white Texans by himself. He had to have Loosh's help."

"It won't be long now," Killraine said, squeezing her. "Only a few more weeks, and then you'll be together. And you've got all those letters that I brought."

"I'll read myself to sleep with them tonight. Oh, Phil, Henry, you don't know how much I've worried, how glad I am to see you." She turned to Gannon, who sat with

Irene on the other davenport in the living room of the suite. "But I knew you'd bring them through!"

Gannon grinned. "Nothing to it," he said, a little thickly.

It was after midnight and Henry was, deservedly, a little drunk. Killraine, too, but as much on pride as good bourbon whiskey. Not since Lee's surrender had he known such a day of triumph.

Everything had fallen slickly into place. The herd was bedded safely five miles from town, the men had drawn lots to see which half of the crew hit Pueblo first—and for a wonder, the drawing had caused no quarrels or fights. Evelyn and Irene Gannon had taken to one another immediately, and Evelyn's clothes had fitted Irene perfectly; she was stunning now in a long blue dress that set off her golden hair. Evelyn had listened avidly to the whole history of the drive: Elias's successful negotiations with the Comanche chief Noconah; the fight with the Tryon bunch of cattle thieves at the Horsehead Crossing after the brutal traverse across the Big Dry from the Concho to the Pecos; how Irene and Henry had come together—and privately, Phil had told her about Joe Bob Yeager. Gannon's best childhood friend and a superb cattleman, Yeager had joined the drive in Texas as Henry's second-in-command. And later, coveting not only Henry's share in Rancho Bravo, but Irene, had tried to murder Gannon. Henry had killed Joe Bob instead: it was that or die himself. And of all the incidents on the drive, that had hit Henry Gannon hardest. That was what had changed him, made him brooding, almost dour. Evelyn understood and sympathized. "Don't worry. Irene will bring him out of it eventually."

But he had not told her of the coolness of the other drovers to him, nor of Fanning's threat, repeated when Killraine had Wallace brought to town under armed guard and lodged in jail in custody of the town marshal. "Killraine," Fanning had said fiercely, "I warned you—"

There had been a tense moment then, as Wallace, much better now, had been taken from the wagon and helped to mount a horse. Only Gannon, moving between them once more, had balked what might have been a

gunfight. At last, wordlessly, Fanning turned away. When he had gone Henry had asked: "Phil, you still determined?"

"I am." Killraine's voice was hard.

"All right. I'll back you up any way I can. But you got to realize that once you sell the herd, Fanning don't take orders from me any more. And I can't be with you in Pueblo every second."

"I know that," Killraine answered. "I'll take my chances. It's my funeral."

"I hope it ain't," said Henry grimly. "But it damned well could be."

Now Wallace was safely in jail, a doctor summoned, and Killraine had long since dismissed him from his mind. What he wanted now was every scrap of information Evelyn could give that would bear on the market here in Colorado. Refilling his glass, he listened closely to her businesslike summary.

"You've turned Colorado on its ear," she told him. "People are reacting just like they do to a new gold strike."

Sipping champagne, she went on. "Everything we heard back in Texas was absolutely true. People out here are starved for beef. Wages are sky-high in the mines, there's plenty of money around, and the population's growing by leaps and bounds. But there've been no big herds brought in since the first year of the war. That little beef there is comes from a few scattered ranches stocked with a handful of surplus cattle brought in by immigrants, not a drop in the bucket compared to demand. In fact, meat's scarce all around. The Indians make hunting buffalo too dangerous, and the miners have just about wiped out the game in this end of the mountains, and besides, they don't want to take time to hunt.

"Anyhow," she said, "the word spread as soon as you crossed Raton Pass. At least half-a-dozen buyers came down from Denver on the stage with me, and more have poured in every day from the camps back up in the hills. Canon City, Golden City, there are some big towns up there. Anyhow, nobody can talk of anything but Rancho Bravo; the very idea has changed everybody's way of

thinking, sort of triggered off a boom. The idea is that if the beef keeps on coming, the sky's the limit for this whole part of the country. Now the buffalo can be wiped out, and that'll eliminate the Indians, and eventually everything from New Mexico to Canada can be opened up for settlement. Suddenly there's a whole new vision of how this country can be developed—not just the mines, but farms, ranches. . . ."

"Maybe," Killraine said. "What I need to know right now is what we can get for this first herd."

Evelyn frowned. "Honestly, I don't know. From all the talk, I think the sky's the limit. But . . . talk is cheap and there are an awful lot of speculators and just plain bunco artists out here, and you've got to be very careful not to deal with the wrong man." She shook her head. "Really, I don't know how you're going to manage it. If you deal with every buyer here before you sell, it'll take weeks and then you could still get stung."

"Well, I've got some ideas," Killraine said. He drained his glass. "Now, I don't know about anybody else, but my idea of the way to cap this celebration is to get a good night's sleep on something besides the ground for the first time in God knows how long."

"I think that's a marvelous idea," Irene Gannon said, standing up. "Come on, Henry." She took Gannon's arm.

Swaying, he arose, his grin wide. "Think that's a damn good idea. Captain Killraine, I s'lute you. From all I hear, you really gonna earn your salt."

Later, in his own room, Phil sank gratefully into the first real bed he'd occupied in months. Perhaps it was the very novelty of clean sheets and soft mattress that kept him awake for a long time, staring at the ceiling while his mind clicked like a machine, digesting everything he'd learned and weighing alternatives with care. Henry was right; he would earn his salt. The rest had done their part; from now on it was up to him and he could not afford a single mistake.

Then, after a half hour, the idea came. Instantly, he knew that it was right. He sat up straight, lit a cigar, considered it, found no flaw. Finally, wholly satisfied, he

ground out the stogie, lay down again, and almost immediately was asleep.

Pueblo was one of the oldest towns in the West, first a Spanish settlement, later an American trading post, now the gateway to mountains where men lusting for quick riches dug like moles and marmots in the flanks of peaks, and tunneled gorge and canyon walls. Its permanent population was not much above six hundred, but its floating population more than doubled that. As Killraine saw next morning, its streets thronged with hardrock men and placer men, and the merchants, gamblers, speculators, teamsters, and painted women who supplied or preyed on them. There was, too, a drifting element of men with guns who seemed to do no work at all; and there were buckskinned trappers and frontiersmen, and a few blanketed Paiutes and Pawnees.

Unlike Texas, the luxuries were easy to come by here, Killraine noted: the unending streams of gold pouring from the mountain gulches paid for the freighting of everything from grand pianos to oysters in airtight cans, and, he had been told, even experienced and cultured courtesans. But necessities like fresh meat and vegetables were a different matter. Well, he thought with pride, where meat was concerned, Rancho Bravo would change all that.

Knowing now what he would do, he also knew that for now, the main thing was not to hurry. In this case, haste not only made waste, it could cost Rancho Bravo thousands. In the morning he took his time: a bath and clean clothes, a civilian suit, the wrinkles of long storage and hard traveling freshly ironed. Shave and haircut in a barber shop, after a breakfast of white bread, real eggs, and sidemeat bacon, a blissful change from the eternal beef and biscuits of the drive. Prices were of course outrageous, here where common laborers made three dollars and a half a day, miners five, brickmasons seven—or about six times as much as the average Rancho Bravo drover. But that did not matter; in a few days Rancho Bravo could afford anything it wanted.

He made that clear to Evelyn and Irene. "You two had better get your heads together and make up a list of what you'll need to tide you over at least eight months down in Big Bend. It'll be that long before we bring another herd up here. And, remember, no need to cut the corners. We want things that'll help to make life bearable for all of us down there. Cloth and clothes, fruit in airtights, china, cutlery, mattresses, furniture for your respective households and some for digs for Elias and myself, plus we'll have at least twenty men to feed. A piano if you want one, or a parlor organ, and lots of music: any books or magazines you can find. Henry and I will see to the necessities, the tools and ammunition, guns and trade goods, ropes and saddles. . . . Anyhow, we'll be taking a big wagon train south with us, and you have a free hand; money will be no object, I promise you."

After that, he went out among the buyers. Like coyotes after a deer, they closed in on him and almost pulled him down. He spent a rough day, only sipping the drinks they bought him, listening with both ears and all attention to everything they said. Meanwhile, he was fairly sure Henry Gannon would get the same treatment. He told each of them the same thing, after he had picked their brains, "Gentlemen, Rancho Bravo will dispose of its herd in a way that will give everyone a fair chance." The certainty that he was right in what he planned had been reinforced twice over. "I hope to have full details for everyone by tomorrow afternoon."

Evelyn was right, he thought, as he walked toward the marshal's office. At least half these would-be buyers were purely confidence-men. Well, his scheme would take care of them.

The marshal's office was of lumber, but the jail behind it was of rubble from the mines, mortared and impregnable. The marshal's name was Wolfe; he was in his middle thirties, big, clean-cut, intelligent, and competent, with black hair and beard and an accent that Killraine tagged as either Illinois or Indiana. "Yeah, the doctor looked at the kid's back, Mr. Killraine. Said it was in good shape,

not much more that he could do. Give him a week and he can travel." Then Wolfe's face was hard as he leaned forward across his desk. "But if you want me to keep him, you got to do something about your Texas people."

Killraine sat up straight. "Meaning what?"

"Half-a-dozen of 'em, dead drunk and led by a man named Fanning, showed up here last night and demanded I turn him loose." Wolfe smiled coldly. "A sawed-off shotgun cooled 'em, though. They wasn't so liquored up they wanted to face eighteen buck. But they wanted that boy. Not to lynch him, but to set him free."

"I'm sorry, but—"

"Don't apologize," Wolfe said. "It's my job. Anyhow, he ain't the first deserter I've had to hold. There's been a lot from Sedgwick lately. I don't know how they run that fort up there, but it sure ain't the army the way I recollect it."

"You were in the war?"

Wolfe nodded. "Wasn't everybody? Yeah, Eighteenth Volunteer Illinois Infantry, got all the way up to corporal. Coffee?"

"Yes, thank you."

Wolfe went to the stove, poured two cups from an enamel pot, handed one to Killraine, sat down behind his desk again. His face was grim as he went on. "I've seen men shot for desertion, too, but that was wartime, in the face of the enemy. What I never seen is a boy cut up the way this one was. In my outfit we'd have taken any officer apart that did that, no matter how much brass he wore."

"The same in mine. That's why I think he's lying."

"No," Wolfe said. "He ain't lying. I've seen too many whip marks on other soldiers from up at Sedgwick since Hopper took command."

Killraine set down his cup. "I think I'd better talk to Wallace."

"Later, if you want to. Right now he's asleep. And the doctor says he needs all of that he can get. But he and I had a long talk last night, and I've heard his story and I'm convinced it's true. But I guess you've heard it too."

"Not all of it, I've been too busy."

"And he's been too weak. Well, sure. All right, it stacks up like this." Wolfe sipped his coffee. "The kid's from New York City, a part of it they call Hell's Kitchen. His folks were dead, his sister worked in a sewing room there to support him and her—she's about five years older than he is.

"I'm aware of that. He joined the army to take the pressure off her."

"That's right. In those sweatshops, they treat the women worse than cattle and pay 'em nearly nothing. They couldn't come close to making it on what she earned, and Dick was afraid that—Well, do you know where most of the street women in New York come from? Out of the sweatshops, that's what he says."

Killraine felt a kind of chill. "He was afraid his sister would go on the streets?"

"For his sake. To keep him alive. So he enlisted. I'll admit, I never seen anybody less cut out for a soldier, but it seems he did all right until he got to Sedgwick and crosswise of Hopper."

Killraine found two cigars, passed Wolfe one. "Just who is this Major Hopper?"

Wolfe shrugged. "West Point man, I understand—like you. Only he never saw any combat. Had some relative that got him an easy job on a staff in Washington, quick promotions and never heard a shot. After the war, he had enough drag to keep his temporary rank and they sent him out to Sedgwick. He don't seem to be worth a damn against the Indians, but apparently he's pure hell on discipline."

Killraine sighed. He had met such officers and had alway despised them. And when they were West Point men, such conduct became obscene. The motto of the Point was: *Duty, Honor, Country*. None of those ideals was served by the kind of whipping Wallace had taken. "Go on."

"Hopper brought along his own personal dogrobber, a First John named Cross, for adjutant. Between the two of them, they've raised pure hell up there and that's why

men desert right and left. All the same, Wallace might have stood what they dealt him—the spread-eaglin', at least—if he hadn't just got a letter from his sister."

"What kind of letter?"

"He was feelin' sorry for himself and fired off a lot of letters about the treatment he was gettin'. And then all of a sudden, one came from her. She'd quit the sweatshop, got a job with some travelin' bunch of stage people, and she was in Denver working as a song and dance girl in some saloon to raise money to buy him out." Wolfe's voice rasped. "You know what a song and dance girl is in Denver?"

"I have," Killraine said, chill deepening, "a fair idea of what a song and dance girl is anywhere."

"So he'd triggered the same thing he'd enlisted to keep from happening. And now he's a deserter and she's a—" Wolfe spread his hands.

"A fallen woman," Killraine said.

"Yes. And God knows what will happen to both of them. He'll wind up at twenty years' hard labor, and she'll end in a cathouse or hogranch for the miners. It's a stinking situation. It makes me ashamed of the uniform I wore so long. Anyhow—" Wolfe drained his cup "—I think we ought to strike a deal."

"A deal?" Killraine's eyes narrowed.

"That's right. You've told me what you aim to do to sell your herd, and you know it's risky and so do I. You can't bring it off without me. Well, I'll go along. But in return, you'll have to go along with me."

"In what way?"

Wolfe arose, went to the door, looked out on the teeming street. A tall, hard figure, broad of shoulder, slim of hip, all man—the kind of man Rancho Bravo could use, Killraine thought, the kind of man whose friendship Rancho Bravo needed.

"For my own personal satisfaction," Wolfe said at last, "I want that mess at Sedgwick cleared up. Dick Wallace may be the lever somebody can use to do it. Not me, no, but somebody else—somebody like you, a West Point man too, with a good, clean record."

He paused. "Anyhow, it's up to you. You can turn Wallace in and wash your hands and you and Hopper are both Point men together, or you can be a real soldier and use the influence you got and the money you'll have to kill that nest of snakes up there. It's up to you, as an ex-officer. If you'll promise me that you'll go all the way with Wallace, no matter how the chips fall, and see that he gets a fair shake, I'll hold him for you. But if you and Hopper are gonna cuddle up as members of the club, the next time Fanning and his men come, I'll turn Dick over to 'em."

Killraine stood up. "Marshal, that's not within your authority."

Wolfe turned, smiling wryly. "My authority is what the vigilance committee in this town says it is. We've done without federal law out here for a long time, Captain. This town, Denver, and every camp in the mountains is ruled and governed by a vigilance committee. Vigilantes if you want to call them that, but there ain't no help for it, because there's no other law. So we follow mining-camp law, which has been laid down ever since the California gold strike. Only the vigilance committee can hire or fire me; mostly they give me a free hand and back me up when I need them. I'll have to call on 'em to carry out this scheme of yours. They're not something you want to get crosswise of."

He paused. "Point graduate or not, I size you up as a first-class officer. My question is, what do you aim to do about Wallace?"

"I intend," Killraine said, "to take him back to Sedgwick. To talk to Major Hopper and Lieutenant Cross. And I assure you, Marshal, if Cross gave him a hundred lashes under Hopper's orders, I will burn both those gentlemen new holes."

Wolfe looked at him for a long, hard moment. Then his face cracked in a grin. "By God, Captain, I think you'll do just that. Okay." He came forward, hand out. "With that promise from you, I'll go along. I'll hold Wallace against all-comers, for you to take back to Sedgwick

and I'll see that nobody steals your quarter-of-a-million or half-a-million dollars."

"Then we understand each other," Killraine said. "I'll be in touch with you later, Marshal."

"At your service, Captain Killraine," Wolfe said. They shook hands, and Phil left, completely satisfied. Wallace was in good hands, and the most important part of his scheme for selling the Rancho Bravo herd had fallen into place.

INVITATION TO BID!!! RANCHO BRAVO WILL RECEIVE AND OPEN SEALED BIDS FOR ITS HERD OF 1,700 TEXAS CATTLE AT FOUR O'CLOCK ON THE AFTERNOON OF SEPTEMBER 20, 1866, IN DINING ROOM OF PUEBLO HOUSE HOTEL, PUEBLO, COLORADO TERR. BIDS MUST STATE BUYER'S PRICE PER HEAD ON HOOF DELIVERED PUEBLO AND BE SUBMITTED IN PLAIN SEALED ENVELOPE! NO UNSEALED BIDS WILL BE RECEIVED! NOTICE!!! EACH BID MUST BE ACCOMPANIED BY 25% OF TOTAL AMOUNT IN CERTIFIED DRAFT ACCEPTABLE TO PUEBLO BANKS, EXPRESS COMPANIES, OR IN CURRENCY, SPECIE, OR GOLD!!!

BALANCE PAYABLE THREE DAYS AFTER BIDDING OR DEPOSIT FORFEITED TO RANCHO BRAVO! NEXT HIGH BIDDER WILL BE DEALT WITH!

NO BID CONSIDERED WITHOUT DEPOSIT! UNSUCCESSFUL BIDDERS' DEPOSITS RETURNED IMMEDIATELY! SECURITY OF ALL DEPOSITS GUARANTEED BY MARSHAL ED WOLFE OF PUEBLO AND PUEBLO VIGILANCE COMMITTEE!!!

NOTICE!!! NOTICE!!! NO BID DELIVERED AFTER FOUR O'CLOCK SHARP WILL BE CONSIDERED, NO MATTER WHAT ITS SOURCE OR WHETHER HIGH OR LOW!!!

Henry Gannon read the poster one more time and then, convulsively, crumpled it in his fist. "No!" he snapped.

Killraine fought back his mounting anger. "What's your objection?" he asked, as alone, they faced one another in the living room of the hotel suite.

"It just won't work," Gannon snapped. "That's my objection. You don't sell cattle thataway. Nobody has ever sold a herd like that."

"Rancho Bravo has done a lot of things nobody else has done before."

"Goddammit, Phil—" Gannon threw the crumpled wad into the corner of the room. "It won't work, I tell you! Listen! Since I was old enough to ride, I went with my daddy on every drive he made to New Orleans! I've heard him dicker with the buyers more times than I can count! And he never came away with anything less than top price. But the way he got it was to drink and joke with 'em and play one against the other. You don't sell a herd like playin' a hand of showdown! You sell it like playin' draw—you back and fill and bluff and keep everybody uppin' the ante."

Killraine took out a cigar and looked at it, keeping in mind that Henry was pretty drunk. Buyers and speculators had swarmed around him the live-long day. Even so, he was coherent and earnest, and his contentions must be refuted with cold logic. Killraine bit the end off the cigar.

"Henry, I don't deny what you say. But that was in a different era—before the war, and in a buyer's market, not a seller's. I submit that those rules no longer hold. No rules hold in this market except the ones we make ourselves."

"That ain't what they told me," Henry answered stubbornly. "I've talked with a lot of buyers in the past few days and I've kept my ears open! Everybody tells me the same thing: they'll dicker, they'll negotiate! But this way— Folks out here aren't used to anything like this! It's like pourin' cold water on 'em!"

"I don't think so," Killraine said, lighting the cigar. He

was tired, tense, but he knew the value of patience now. "Henry, look here. There must be sixty would-be buyers in this town. If we try to deal with each individually, we'll be here till doomsday. More than that, we don't know 'em. I daresay your father knew every buyer in New Orleans personally, his reputation and his background. Here we're dealing with a lot of strangers, and at least half of them are fly-by-nights or bankrupts."

"We were bankrupts, too, until we hit Pueblo," Gannon said. "Phil, you don't understand business out here. A man with no money can bid high on that herd, and if he gets the nod, he can raise the cash. You're askin' them to put it up in advance, and you're eliminatin' our highest bidders. It's just the ones who don't have the money that'll shoot the moon! And if they get the herd, they can get the money!"

Killraine took the cigar from his mouth. He was canny enough to know that there was merit in what Gannon said. Still, he had weighed all alternatives, and his mind was made up, he would not budge. "Business is business," he said. "And I think I know how a businessman's mind works. If we dicker with each one individually, as you say, word will leak, people will band together against us, make deals among themselves, and we'll be the losers. This way, they put up or they shut up. We play them off, not against us, but against each other. With sealed bids, nobody will know what the other's bidding until they're opened, no chance for deals among themselves. Each man will have to lay it on the line or miss his opportunity. And when it's over, no one can say we haven't been fair and spread poison against Rancho Bravo afterwards. This is the way the army let a lot of contracts and the way big construction contracts are let in the East. I've investigated, considered all alternatives, and I'm convinced this will bring us a better price than we could get in any other way." He paused. "Besides, I've already sent those posters out to Denver and all the mining camps and had them put up here in Pueblo. I've made arrangements to rent the hotel dining room and for Marshal Wolfe to guard the

deposits and for the president of the bank and the express company agent to be there to certify all drafts. Even if we wanted to back out, there's no way we could."

"Well, I still think it's pretty damned high-handed—"

Killraine blew smoke. "Henry, did I ever question your orders on the drive?"

Gannon opened his mouth, then closed it. "No."

"That was your area of responsibility. This is mine. I'll thank you not to intervene."

"All right," Gannon said, after a moment. "You're right, it's up to you. But I still don't like it. Especially the deposit, and most especially that damned time limit. If a man comes in with a high bid a few minutes after four—"

"It's rejected," Killranie said.

"And Rancho Bravo loses money."

"That's all supposition to begin with. I don't think Rancho Bravo will lose a cent, I think it'll gain a lot. Anyway, after long hard thought, it's the way, I am determined to handle the sale. And that's the end of it."

Gannon went to the bottle on the table, half filled his glass. "God, you Yankees are hard-headed," he said bitterly.

"That is precisely what I was hired on to be with this outfit." Killraine's voice sharpened. "I have been everyone's subordinate on this drive until now, willingly, because things were going on I was no expert in. I have waited my turn and I intend to have it. Meanwhile, I notice you didn't complain when I sunk all the money Evelyn and I had in Rancho Bravo, or when I sold five hundred culls at Sumner for fantastic prices, or when I did my share of fighting Indians and cattle thieves! I've had enough thrown at me because I am a Yankee. Now the boot is on the other foot—I'm in charge, and I always understood a Southerner's word was his bond. Is it, or is it not?"

He saw how hard the jab hit Gannon. "It is," Henry said. "All right, Phil, it's up to you."

Killraine relaxed a little. "Very well. Now, I've talked to people and you've talked to people. What do you think we'll get for the herd?"

"Your way, I don't know. My way, I'm pretty sure we could get a hundred straight across the board." He pronounced the figure with awe.

Killraine smiled grimly. "Henry, I'll guarantee you that my way we'll do better than a hundred. A lot better."

Gannon stared at him a moment. "I doubt it," he said finally. "But it don't matter. Either way, my hands are tied." And he turned and left the room.

6

At precisely half-past three they came down the stairs. Killraine and Gannon led, Evelyn and Irene followed, and behind them trailed the three men who also had stock in the Rancho Bravo herd: Carter Fanning, Bledsoe and Ryan. As they debouched into the lobby, Killraine's stomach was tightly knotted and his palms were sweating. Either he was wrong or right. In another hour he would know.

The lobby was empty, save for four hardbitten men with sawed-off shotguns. One of them, Marshal Wolfe, came forward.

"Well, you sure got a full house," he said, jerking his head toward the hotel dining room. "And, I reckon, more to come before the clock strikes four. Lots of money already on hand, but anybody that makes a try for it is a damned fool. Your men there in the dining room, mine

out here in the lobby and more around the place outside. Anybody wants to come in and make a bid can do it, but nobody's going out again unless he goes either peaceable or feet first. Orde from the bank, and Parsons from the express company—they're already inside."

"Good," Killraine said. "I'll want you in there, too, when the bidding starts."

"I'll be there. And when it's over, I'll have a bill for the hire of all these special deputies."

"Fair enough. Ladies, gentlemen—shall we go in?"

"I reckon so," Henry Gannon said. There was still a tinge of sullenness in his voice. For the past three days, he had made no secret of his continuing disapproval of Killraine's plan; that was not surprising, Phil thought, since the highbinders and bunco men who would be frozen out by the requirement of the twenty-five percent deposit had been working on him constantly to get him to use his influence to make Killraine change it. To Gannon's credit, he had not tried. The same crowd had worked on Fanning, too; his face was drawn, eyes circled, with nonstop carousing. Henry had told Phil that Fanning also objected, but that he had told the man there was no help for it: the matter was in Killraine's hands.

Wolfe opened the the double doors to the dining room, and the Rancho Bravo delegation entered.

The room was large, and per Killraine's instructions, its many tables had been arranged in rows, like desks in a schoolroom. Now every seat was occupied, and those who could not find chairs stood. Around the walls lounged half a dozen Rancho Bravo men, sixguns belted on and rifles cradled in their arms.

Evelyn gasped. "Sure these can't all be bidders!"

"No," Killraine said. "The bidders who brought their deposits in cash brought guards, too. And there are newspaper people from Denver and—anybody who has a hand in the pie is welcome."

A stir, a murmur, ran through the place at the sight of them. There was a brassy smell in here, the rank odor of sweat, tension, greed, like the smell of much-handled coins. Two dignified men arose from the rank of tables

near the door, corresponding in placement to a teacher's desk in a schoolroom. One was president of the Pueblo bank, the other agent for Wells-Fargo.

Orde, the banker, shook hands all around, then indicated a pile of envelopes in the center of the row of tables. "Twenty-four bids received so far, Mr. Killraine. I daresay there'll be more. Let me say again, this is a great day for Pueblo, a great day for the whole territory—"

"And I hope a great one for Rancho Bravo," Killraine said.

They took their seats, Killraine in the center, Evelyn on one side of him with notebook and pencil, Gannon on the other, then the banker and the agent, and Irene, Fanning, Bledsoe and Ryan. Killraine fingered the stack of envelopes before him, and a strange thrill ran through him. He thought of all the weary miles they had come, the risks and striving. And somewhere inside one of these was the payoff.

There was a big clock in the far corner of the room. Killraine eyed it. Fifteen minutes to go. Each minute would seem an hour.

He cleared his throat. "Gentlemen," he addressed the room, "may I have your attention? I am Philip Killraine, business manager of Rancho Bravo. I'll introduce my associates—"

He did so, ending, "And you all know Mr. Orde and Mr. Parsons. They are here to certify the validity of any drafts or checks presented as deposit on the Rancho Bravo herd."

He paused. Five minutes gone, thank God. The room was silent, dozens of pairs of eyes fixed raptly on him. "I understand," he continued, "that this way of taking bids is new to many of you, especially the requirement of the deposit and the hard-and-fast time deadline. I'll go over it once again.

"The whole object is to give each man one crack and one crack only at the Rancho Bravo cattle. Once bids are read aloud, there'll be no horse-trading and no dickering. The purpose of the substantial deposit is to keep out bidders who aren't serious and save your time and ours. By

making the deposit forfeit to Rancho Bravo if the balance of the price isn't paid in three days, we're guaranteed against damages that might result from any slip-up due to somebody's nonperformance. And as for the time limit—There has to be a cut-off point somewhere. I've tried to allow plenty of time for the word to get around and everybody interested to get here."

He pointed at the clock on the rear wall. "That clock has been set by Mr. Parsons to express company time, and it will govern. We will accept bids up until the last stroke of four and not one second after. As soon as the clock stops striking, I will open the bids one by one, read them aloud. As your name is called, you will come forward and present your deposit to be verified by Messrs. Parsons, Orde, and Wolfe, in cash or check. If your bid is high, the deposit will be retained until a higher bid is read. If it's under a bid already read, you may take it back immediately. Marshal Wolfe, his special deputies from the Pueblo vigilance committee, and Rancho Bravo itself all guarantee the safety of all money in this hotel. Once you leave the hotel, you're on your own; we take no responsibility."

He broke off as a harried-looking man came dashing in, envelope in one hand, satchel in the other. "Am I in time?"

"Of course," Killraine said. "It's still four minutes until four o'clock." He took the envelope, put it on the bottom of the pile.

"Any questions or comments, gentlemen?" he asked, as the new arrival found a place to stand.

For a moment, silence. Then a man at a forward table rose. Killraine recognized Laird Conroy, the first buyer to reach the herd. "I'll just say this, Mr. Killraine. You've cramped my style considerably, but win, lose, or draw, I have never run across a fairer way of doing business. Me, I appreciate the thoroughness you've arranged all this with. And—" he grinned "—I hope I get your herd."

"Thank you, sir. And if you've got the high bid, you shall have it. Mrs. Calhoon, wife of one of the partners, will keep a tabulation. Now—"

The clock made a loud click. Then, as it gonged the first stroke of four, every man in the room sat up straight. A second stroke, a third, and then the fourth; Killraine's heart pounded and his mouth was dry. Then silence.

"Gentlemen," Killraine said, "that's it. No more bids will be received. I will now proceed to open those we have and read them."

His hand shook slightly as he picked up the first envelope. When they had rounded up the herd in Texas, twenty dollars a head had seemed a fortune. Now they had already been offered up to a hundred, even before this bidding. But the higher offers had been from fly-by-nights; these were real. And every dollar's variation meant seventeen hundred dollars in the total sale-price. Suppose he were wrong, suppose they could not beat a hundred this way? Suppose his method of doing things had driven the price down below that level, as Henry had predicted? Then he would be revealed as a fool, an incompetent.

He slit the flap, pulled out a folded sheet of paper. "This—"

"Git outa my way, you goddam pissant!"

It was a deep-voiced bellow from the lobby. Then, as Marshal Wolfe whirled, shotgun raised, the double doors of the dining room burst open and five huge men stalked in, each wearing a pair of guns and each carrying two heavy canvas sacks.

As they strode around the table to confront Killraine, one word burst from Wolfe, "Lawrence!"

The leader of the five grinned. "That's right, Wolfe! Jethro Lawrence from Raven's Camp! We're here to buy the Rancho Bravo herd. Which one of you fellers takes the money?"

A hush fell across the room, as Philip Killraine stared at the giant before him. Better than six feet four in his muddy boots, he was wide in the shoulders and huge in the chest, gaunt and rawboned and long of arm and leg. Easily in his middle fifties and maybe older, he had, beneath a thick, wiry mane of iron-gray hair, a face like something hacked from flint, big-nosed and craggy-

chinned and seamed with weather, inset by eyes exactly the color of a pistol ball, cold gray, but lit by an inner flame of immense vitality. He wore patched and muddy miner's clothes—wool jacket, flannel shirt, corduroy pants—and he was powdered with the dust of travel. But the two Colts on his hips were absolutely free from any dirt that might hamper their action.

"I said—" he began, in a voice like a locomotive's rumble.

Killraine stood up, feeling dwarfed by the man's height. And the other four with him were just as big, though younger; enough like Jethro Lawrence to certify them as his sons. "I am Philip Killraine, sir, business manager of Rancho Bravo."

"Then you're the bucko I wanta see." Lawrence dropped one heavy canvas sack on the table with an impact that shook it, reached in his pocket, brought out a folded, dirty envelope, dropped it on the table. "Like I said, I'm Jethro Lawrence from Raven's Camp, back up behind Royal Gorge, and these here are my boys and that's my bid. It'll top any pissant's piddlin' you got so far, so open it and read it and listen to the tinhorns howl!"

Killraine stared at the bag. "Mr. Lawrence—"

"What's the matter? Think we ain't got the money? Bud, Rance, Jimmy, Sonny—bring them bags here!"

Each Lawrence son had his father's height and spread of shoulder; every one had long, unkept, blond hair and bullet-colored eyes. When they shambled forward and dropped their bags on the table, it groaned beneath their weight. "Gold dust," Lawrence said. "There it is, Killraine, enough to cover our whole bid for your herd, guaranteed pure and not one grain less or one grain more. Jest pick it up and write the bill of sale. And don't worry about anybody beatin' my price. I'm offerin' you—"

Sharply, Killraine cut him off, trying to control his rage. This rawboned giant's arrogance was intolerable; what was more so was the position he'd put Rancho Bravo in by being late. Well—"I'm afraid what you're offering doesn't matter. I can't receive your bid!"

"You can't—" Lawrence's gray brows drew together. "The hell you can't! Why not?"

"Because the bidding closed at four o'clock. It is now five past four, and it was two past when you walked in. You're too late to bid, Mr. Lawrence, and I'll thank you to watch your language henceforth; there are ladies present!"

Lawrence opened his mouth, closed it. His voice was completely bereft of bluster, cold as water running over rocks, when he said, "Wait a minute, feller. You tellin' me your outfit won't take my bid because I'm two minutes late?"

"Exactly that," Killraine said. The room was very quiet, the eyes of every bidder fixed on him. He knew that, in this moment, in a real sense, the whole future of Rancho Bravo was at stake. There was money in those bags, a lot of it—whether less than anyone else would pay, or more, he did not know. What he did know was that he had made his rules, and if he broke them, the news would spread and no one in the West would ever trust Rancho Bravo again or take Philip Killraine's word for anything. And a businessman whose word was not his bond was finished before he started, especially out here. He pointed at one of the posters on the wall, the bidding invitation. "You've seen that?"

"I seen it, yeah, but—"

"It means what it says. I'm sorry, Mr. Lawrence, but four was the deadline."

Carter Fanning half rose. "Now, wait, Killraine—"

Phil did not even look at him. "Hush. I'm in charge here. Mr. Lawrence, I'll thank you to remove those bags so we can continue. You're welcome to stay or leave, as you please, but—"

Lawrence's bony face was pale beneath its tan and dust as he broke in, "Killraine. You hold on a minute. Nobody talks to me like that. Now, you better git some things straight. Raven's Camp's a damn long way from here, and we've had a hard ride and the pack-horses slowed us down—"

"Then you should have started earlier or brought only a quarter of the load and paid the balance later. A moment, Mr. Lawrence." To Evelyn: "I think you and Irene had better leave the room."

"Yes," she said and the two women did so. When the door closed behind them, Killraine was relieved. He was not worried about their sensibilities; it was violence he feared. Lawrence's hands were at his sides, and his four boys had fanned out behind him, glowering at Killraine with those bullet-colored eyes.

"I appreciate your problems, Mr. Lawrence, but my decision's final."

"Why, you feisty little runt!"

It was Henry Gannon who spoke then, unfolding his long frame from his chair. His own hands swung close to the guns in his hips, and his blue eyes were chill as they met Lawrence's. "Lawrence," he said, "there's a lot of people in this room. I aim to see that none of them get hurt. My name's Gannon and I'm a quarter owner of Rancho Bravo. I say now that what Mr. Killraine's told you goes. But if you want to discuss it more, you and I'll do it alone—outside somewhere."

Lawrence's gaze flickered to Henry, unafraid, cool, appraising. Then it shifted to Wolfe, standing tensely with the sawed-off point. Killraine could almost hear the man's mind click as it calculated odds. Then Lawrence shook his head. "You're makin' a mistake, you Rancho Bravo people, with your nitpickin'," he said hoarsely. "You're cuttin' off your nose to spite your face. But that's your affair, not mine." Without turning, he added, "All right, boys, take back our dust."

"Paw—" the biggest, oldest-looking of the four began. His father had once been a handsome man, but this one, Killraine thought, was just plain ugly: big, shapeless nose, too much chin, thick, loose lips. Dangerous, but not very smart. "Paw—"

"Shut up, Bud, and do like I told you. This pissant wants to play for chicken feed, that's his affair." Then he roared. "Move, damn your hides!"

Reluctantly, the four young men obeyed, glowering.

"All right, we'll stay." Lawrence snatched up the dirty envelope. "At least we'll git a laugh for our troubles." Then, lugging their sacks, he and his sons strode to the far corner of the room and squatted on their heels.

"Killraine, I still think we should take his bid!" Carter Fanning snapped.

"And I can't help what you think." Tension slackening only a little, Killraine sat down again. "This affair will proceed as planned." Then he picked up the first bid, unfolded it and read out a name.

The first bid was ninety a head across the board for the Rancho Bravo herd. From his corner, Jethro Lawrence snorted derisively; beside Killraine, Gannon made a sound of disappointment in his throat.

The second was better, ninety-four, but still far short of what Phil had estimated, far under his hoped-for maximum. His hands were cool when he read the third one: ninety-two.

His mind raced as he reached for the next one. A pattern was forming. Was it possible that the bidders had built a coalition among themselves, agreed to keep the bidding at a certain level? Maybe his scheme had backfired. . . .

He forced himself to hope. These first bids were from Denver, all of them. Naturally they'd be lower, because of the cost of driving the cattle further north. He felt better when the next one, from Pueblo, was a hundred a head, flat.

But, as he opened envelope after envelope, that was a level it seemed impossible to break. As he read the tenth bid, less than a hundred, Lawrence laughed coarsely from his corner. "They're gangin' up on you, Killraine! They'll keep the price down and divide up the pie among themselves!"

"By God, he may be right," Fanning put in.

"Hush, Carter," Henry said, but Killraine caught the doubt in his own voice.

Another bid for a hundred, one for ninety-eight. . . . He felt a sickness in his belly. There were twenty-five bids;

surely all twenty-five couldn't have conspired against Rancho Bravo? In secret negotiation, he could easily have gotten five dollars better. . . .

Then the price took a startling leap. Killraine could not keep the jubilation from his voice. "Mr. Dunaway of Pueblo bids one hundred eight a head!"

A murmur ran around the room. Lawrence only chuckled. Killraine could hear Gannon's tense breathing. He read more bids. All below a hundred. Then another: "Mr. Hamilton bids one hundred twelve."

Everything unknotted within Killraine then. That was a fine price, the kind he'd dreamed of. No matter what happened now, he was out of danger; not even Gannon had dared mention such a figure. Killraine fought back a smile of relief, his face serious. A few more bids, well under that, mostly around a hundred. No matter now; he was vindicated and they were rich.

One more bid. He opened it, called Laird Conroy's name. Conroy came forward, presented a bank draft to Orde. The man only waved his hand. "Hell, you're good for it, Laird."

"Then read my bid, Mr. Killraine," Conroy said tensely.

Killraine stared at the figures and something leaped within him. "Mr. Conroy bids one hundred and fifteen dollars a head!" his voice shook. "That's the last bid, I declare the bidding closed, the herd goes to Laird Conroy of Pueblo!"

For a few heartbeats, the room was completely silent. *A hundred and fifteen a head*—Killraine sat there stunned.

"Hiiii—aaa—yahhh!" The highpitched scream from right beside him made him jump and nearly split his eardrum. Then strong hands yanked him from his chair, spun him around in a crazy dance. "Hhiiiiiiii-aaahhhhh! Look out for Rancho Bravo!" Whooping his rebel yell again, Henry Gannon let Killraine go, snatched off his hat, and threw it at the ceiling. Ryan and Bledsoe joined in, and the room rang with their shouting, as if all the demons had just been given holiday from hell. Killraine found himself laughing almost hysterically, and when the

women opened the doors and came in, eyes wide, Gannon scooped up Irene and spun her. "A hundred fifteen a head! He did it! The little banty rooster did it!"

Then Wolfe said one warning word, "Killraine."

Phil turned. Jethro Lawrence's mouth was twisted wryly as, burdened with gold dust, he and his sons strode toward the table. "Henry," Killraine snapped. "Bledsoe, Ryan. . . ."

Gannon whirled, sobering instantly.

Towering over Killraine, Lawrence ripped the envelope, threw a single crumpled sheet on the table. "All right, you Texas bunch," he said spitefully. "I've heard that time's money, but I never seen nobody pay as much for two minutes as Killraine just cost you. Read that bid."

Phil shook his head. "I decline to."

But Carter Fanning had taken no part in the jubliation. Now he reached across Killraine, snatched it up. His lips worked briefly; then he passed it to Gannon. Henry took it, stared. "Phil," he said hoarsely. "Look." His voice had suddenly gone dull, flat. "Lawrence bid a hundred and twenty-five a head."

Killraine blinked, numbly took the paper. That twisted grin on the gray-maned man's face widened. "That's the size of it, Killraine. You jest cost your outfit seventeen thousand in pure gold dust. I figure that comes to eighty-five hundred a minute. Damn if your services as business manager don't come high." Then he turned his head. "Let's go, boys, and let these idjits stew in their own juice. Gannon, you decide you want to reconsider, that bid's good until four o'clock day after tomorrow. You'll find us in the Cherry Creek Hotel in Denver. Four, you understand? You want that extra seventeen thousand, you better not be one second late!"

Then, without waiting for an answer, he and his sons stamped out.

Again, a tense silence. No one else had any intention of leaving the room until this drama was played out. Conroy's voice was truculent. "Killraine, Gannon, if you try to renege—"

Gannon stared at the paper Killraine held, then shook

his head. "Relax, Conroy. No one's reneging. When Rancho Bravo's made a deal, it sticks to it, even if it costs us money. Phil made the rules, everybody's bound by them, and that's an end to it. Congratulations on being our first buyer." He put out a hand. To anyone else, his heartiness would have sounded genuine; Killraine had known him long enough to sense the shock and tinniness that lay beneath it.

7

And that was human nature, Philip Killraine thought bitterly eight hours later, looking amusingly at the glass of beer he'd just ordered. Six months before, there had not been a man involved with Rancho Bravo, save perhaps himself, who would not have counted a thousand dollars cash as wealth beyond his wildest dreams. At three o'clock this afternoon, Henry Gannon had upped his sights to the price of a hundred and seventy thousand dollars for the Rancho Bravo herd. An hour and a half later, he had been jubilant because they had exceeded that by more than twenty-five thousand dollars. And then Lawrence and that late bid of his, and all Henry could see now was the seventeen thousand extra that his, Killraine's, insistence on adhering to his own rules had cost them. Lawrence, Killraine thought bitterly, had

spoiled it; if he had succeeded in nothing else, he had spoiled it for Henry Gannon and Carter Fanning.

Killraine settled back in his chair in the saloon across the street from his hotel. No, that was being unfair to Henry. Henry had taken it all in as good grace as possible; he had hosted a roaring celebration in the hotel suite for all the Rancho Bravo men, made no sign whatsoever of dissatisfaction as Phil had paid them bonuses amounting to double what they had hoped for. Once or twice, yes, he had bemoaned Killraine's high rate of pay—"Eighty-five hundred's a little high, even for a financial genius"—but he had been very drunk then. No. No, it was his own wounded pride that made him bitter, Killraine thought honestly. That seventeen thousand lost hurt him even more than it did Henry. And that hurt made him vulnerable to any mention of it, despite what Wolfe and Conroy had told them after the dining room was cleared of all save them and the Rancho Bravo people.

Chewing his cigar, he'd shaken his head. "I don't understand. The other bids were so close together, and the Lawrence bid so damned high—"

"There's nothing to understand," Conroy said. "Is there, Wolfe?"

The Marshal shrugged. "You made no mistake, Killraine, Gannon. You're better off not doing business with Jethro Lawrence at any price. No matter what he paid you, there'd have been a joker in the deck somewhere. He never pays full price for anything—and he never pays for anything he can steal."

They all stared at Wolfe. "Is that a fact?" Gannon asked. "Who is that Lawrence bunch, anyhow?"

"Jethro and his boys? The top dogs in one of the roughest bunches ever to land out here. They blew in three years ago. Way I hear it, they're originally from West Virginia, back up in the mountains, and they was in the Union Army."

"Tell 'em about the pay train," Conroy said.

"Yeah," Wolfe said. "Well, the story goes that while they was soldiers, they were part of a detail guarding a

pay train for McDowell's Army of the Potomac. Only the pay train never reached the army. The wagons were found burned and looted and the guard detail slaughtered —and naturally the blame was laid on the Confederates, folks said Jeb Stuart. Be that as it may, there wasn't any dead Lawrences in the bunch—and not long after that, they blew in here, the old man and his boys, with the most hard cash anybody had seen out here for years. They buried themselves back up in the mountains near Raven's Camp, and at first they *bought* up some good claims. Wasn't long, though, until the rest of their gang started driftin' in. More Lawrences from the West Virginia hills. Uncles, cousins, whatever—the whole damned clan, includin' kids and womenfolk. And every one of 'em, man and woman, mean as a snake and tough as an old boot. The men, they'd fight you, gouge and stomp, gun or knife, if you looked slaunchwise at 'em. Anyhow, in a year they'd taken over Raven's Camp entirely."

"And not with money," Conroy said. "By force."

"That's the size of it," Wolfe continued. "Not only the camp itself, but all the territory behind it. Raven's Camp is set so nobody can get through to that part of the Front Range without passin' through it. Now the Lawrences have got it locked up. No supplies go in they don't sell, no gold comes out they don't git a cut of. And anybody bucks 'em, why—It ain't hard to hide a body back up there."

"They rule that whole section of the mountains like caesars," Conroy said. "Up yonder, you do business with 'em their way or you take the consequences. Anyhow, Gannon, don't grieve over that lost seventeen thousand. Lawrence would have paid it, sure, and taken title to the herd. But after he'd had it, he'd of figured some way to get it back and more before you left Colorado."

Henry snorted. "You don't know much about Rancho Bravo, Conroy. What we get, we hold. But ever since I've been here, I've heard talk about vigilance committees and how they keep the law out here. If the Lawrence bunch is all this hairy, how come you folks haven't decorated trees with 'em long before now?"

Conroy shrugged. "That's up to the folks that have to deal with 'em—and the Lawrences have got them plumb buffaloed. Far as we're concerned down here, or the folks in Denver, we'd like to see them gone, yeah. But it's no skin off our noses. Anyhow, the way in to Raven's Camp is the best fort you've ever seen—ten men could defend it against an army. People down here aren't about to take the casualties rubbing out the Lawrences would involve. We'll wait until the army gets back out here in force, or federal marshals. Those folks get paid to die."

He turned to Killraine, smiled. "Anyhow, if that's settled, can we wind up things this afternoon? I paid a lot more than I intended to, but the money's in the bank and ready. I won't make much profit on this deal, but I figure you're in business to stay and so am I, and I'll get a chance on the next herd, an edge."

He gestured to the papers on the table. "Some of 'em ganged up on you, Killraine, yeah. You can tell from those bids which ones they were—anything under a hundred a head. They wanted some others of us to join, but you played it straight and so did we. Anyhow, next time you bring a herd, you'll know who to deal with—otherwise, it might have taken you years and a lot of money to find out. Right now, though, I'd like to go and settle and take possession."

So it was done now, Killraine thought; and no use crying over spilt milk, especially when it was the Lawrences who'd tipped the pitcher. Let it ride for now. By God, he'd done all right. Maybe Fanning didn't think so and Henry still had doubts. But Ryan and Bledsoe had been ecstatic. They were rich men now, as wealth was figured in Texas, and they had made no secret of their gratitude. "Mr. Killraine, I don't know how to thank you," Ryan had said. "You've done—well, you've done jest changed my whole life."

And those words, and the tone in which he'd said them and Bledsoe had joined in was payment enough. Put the past behind; think of the future. Rancho Bravo's and his own.

Rancho Bravo's, Phil thought, was secure. It had its capital now, and this was only the beginning. The sky was the limit, he would see that there would be no resting on their laurels. And make sure no wild gambles would break them. It would grow now, but surely, sanely, with a touch of daring, certainly, but never staking more, if he could help it, than it could afford to lose. . . .

And as for his own future—Well, that was another problem. His next move was clear: take Wallace back to Sedgwick. But, after that, in long-range terms—

Philip Killraine was aware of an acute loneliness. Once he'd had Evelyn to share with, but now his sister had foresaken him for Lucius Calhoon. Once he'd had the neat, sheltering framework of the army, but he was clear of that now. All he had left to cling to was Rancho Bravo, and at best he would keep on being an outsider for a long time. Henry was bound to Irene; Whitton had once been married to a Comanche woman and might have taken another one by now. Families were being built, tight units. But he remained alone.

Looking around the saloon, surprisingly lavish and solid, he took out a cigar and lit it. There was no denying it: he hungered for a woman.

Of course, he could have one here and now. Physically. At least two dozen circulated through the jam of men, still using the sale of the Rancho Bravo herd as occasion for celebration. He had to admit that for the past half hour his eyes had been following them and his body had been responding to the uninhibited show of breast and leg revealed by their scanty clothes. One part of him yearned simply for animal release; another part was revolted by it. Yes, he needed a woman, but not a dancehall girl, a prostitute, a fallen woman.

A little ruefully, he smiled. Even after months of celibacy, there was no erasing his legacy from generations of austere, puritanical, New England forebears. He appreciated a round breast and well-turned ankle as much as any man, but certain standards were part of him, boundaries he could not cross. His idea of a woman was not one of these painted jades, but an ideal, a dream; beautiful,

gently bred, accomplished and intelligent, and above all virtuous. When he found the right one, he would sire children; and after all that was the aim and end of all his working. But the mother of his children would be a paragon, worthy of them and of himself. . . . Meanwhile, no matter what strain it involved, he would leave these creatures of the gutter alone, not demean himself in any way with them. . . .

He drank half the glass of beer. Then he sat up straight, touched with dismay and hunger. Because one of the dancing girls had spotted him and was obviously making straight for his table.

Involuntarily, he took in every detail of her as she came toward him. A big blonde, she wore a tight costume leaving no doubt as to the ampleness of her bosom, her curve of hips, her heft of legs in black silk stockings. Her face was painted, her bare skin powdered. She could have been younger or older than himself; cosmetics disguised her age. Killraine's hand tightened on his glass as she pulled out a chair and smiled.

"Hello, lonesome goodlookin'," she said in a throaty voice. "Ain't you Mr. Killraine with the Rancho Bravo herd?"

Ever the gentleman, he arose. "Yes, miss, my name is Killraine."

"They call me Letty." Without invitation, she sat down, leaning forward immediately so that her breasts sagged and Killraine saw nearly all of them. As he took his seat, he caught a musky, exciting whiff of mingled perfume and perspiration.

"Whoo," Letty said. "Dancin' with these miners is like choppin' firewood. It sure makes a girl thirsty. Buy me a drink, huh, honey?"

"Well, I—Of course." Killraine motioned for a waiter who came immediately.

"I adore champagne, don't you?" Letty said, and without waiting for an answer, said, "Two champagnes here, Eddie." Then she put out a hand for him to shake. "Congrats. Whole town's talkin' about your big deal today.

Anybody pulls off somethin' like that, he's entitled to a little fun."

Her touch ran through Killraine like an electric shock: hastily he released her hand. "And," she went on, "no ordinary good time with no ordinary girl, neither. I mean, after all, you can afford the best." Her voice was nasal, metallic; the red paint was cracking on her lips and there was a tiny scab just beneath her left nostril. "Well, let me tell you somethin', lover, I'm the best there is in this little ole burg. You ask anybody—Letty's pure velvet."

Killraine swallowed hard. Desire exploded in him, but it was, blessedly, followed by revulsion that freed him from it as his whole being rebelled against having anything to do with such a shameful, tarnished creature. "I'm sure you are," he heard himself say, and then he was on his feet, dropping a ten dollar gold piece on the table. "I hope that'll cover the champagne. Nice to have met you, Miss Letty—Good night. I must go."

"Hey, wait a minute," she squawked as Killraine went out; but, once on the sidewalk, he did not look back.

The wind from the mountains was cool and cleansing. Feeling as if he were wound up as tightly as a spring, he began to walk, following the main street to its end. When he reached the edge of town, he stood there for several minutes, smoking and looking at the great bulk of the Shining Mountains in the distance and the vast, star-sprinkled sky overhead. Presently, he started back for his hotel along the other side of the street. He did not go far before he came to another bar, housed in a small, shabby adobe building. Still wound up, the thought of sleep intolerable, he wanted another beer and time to think. He cracked the door, looked in, saw the clientele was mostly masculine, if not wholly so, and entered. He took a vacant table in the corner, ordered. Leaning back in his chair, he shifted the Colt in its flapped holster to a more comfortable position on his thigh. Now that they were back in civilization, it seemed absurd to wear a gun; and yet he had been so nervous without one that he could not give up its comforting weight. He took out another cigar,

snapped a match and lit it. He looked around the room. There were not many people at the tables; most were clustered around the short bar. Then bodies shifted, and somebody said thickly, "Barkeep, lay on another one for ever'body, and I'll pay. Rich man, you understand? Hell, I jest made thirty-five thousand iron men today. Jesus, I can buy drinks for everybody from now 'til doomsday." The man turned. Killraine stiffened and knew he had made a mistake by coming in here, for the speaker was Carter Fanning.

Fanning's dark, unfocused eyes ranged the room. They shifted past Killraine, then came back, and Fanning straightened up. "Well," he said. "Well. Here's one of the Rancho Bravo owners. Good old Phil Killraine." And he shoved himself off the bar and, very drunk, came swaying to Killraine's table.

Philip Killraine sighed. There was a brassy taste in his mouth, an acridity in his nostrils, that had nothing to do with the cigar. Fanning bumped into the table, halted, eyes blinking rapidly.

"Hello, Carter," Killraine said. "Sit down. I'll buy you a drink."

Fanning gave him an owlish stare. Then, using a spur, he hooked out a chair, dropped into it. "I'll do that," he said, voice blurred. "Figure you owe me one. Matter of fact, Killraine, you owe me a damnsight more than that."

Carefully, Killraine laid his cigar in an ashtray. "I'm sorry, I don't understand."

"Why—" Fanning spread his hands. "It's purty damned simple. You cost me more'n three thousand bucks today by turnin' down that feller Lawrence's bid."

"No, that was necessary."

"Ness'ry?" Fanning shook his head. "Two lousy minutes and it was ness'ry? Silly, thass what is. You and your damn clocks."

"Carter," Killraine said. "Listen to me; we've had our differences. But, remember: you wanted to sell out for eighty-five a head on the Arkansas. I made you an extra thirty; nine thousand dollars— Give me some credit for

that, will you?" He smiled. "Anyhow, like you told those people at the bar, you're rich. You can put that money in Rancho Bravo or start a ranch of your own, or— The possibilities for you are unlimited now."

"No," said Fanning. "You owe me three thousand dollars. I had three hundred head in the herd and you cost me that much when you turned down ole Lawrence's bid." He slammed the table with a fist. "I want that money or I want Dick Wallace!" Then he was sly. "Trade you three thousand dollars for the kid, Killraine."

Philip Killraine sat up stright. "Fanning, listen—"

"No, you listen," and Fanning was not smiling now. "I'm gonna tell you something', Killraine, and I want you to listen hard. I had a brother, only brother I ever had, y'understand? Left him at home to mind things, but he couldn't stay. He was only fifteen when he ran off to join Kirby Smith's Army of the West."

Suddenly Fanning's face slackened, seemed to collapse. "My little brother, Killraine, you understand? My daddy died when we was both hardly big enough to spit at. Him and me slept in the same bed all our lives until I went off to war. I loved that kid, I wanted him to stay home safe with Mama until I come back, but he had to go run off and join Kirby Smith—"

"I'm sorry," Killraine said. "Did he become a casualty?"

"I don't *know*," Fanning answered, and there was agony in his voice. "Nobody has had news of him since 1865, early. I don't know whether he's dead or livin'." His hands, both of them on the table, clenched into fists. "Where is he, alive or dead, sufferin', needin' help, or okay? I don't know. All I know is that when he was little, I used to tickle him and scare him with stories about the boogerman, and he had this cornshuck doll he hugged every night when he went to sleep and. . . ." His nails clawed the table. "Now he's grown, I reckon. I've been a daddy to him most of his life, but if he's still alive, he's grown the size of Wallace. That ain't your put-in anyhow, you understand? All I know is that I useta look after him—And now I don't know where he is."

"So you want to look after Wallace," Killraine said.

"I think," Fanning said, "the Yankee Army has eaten enough kids. Wartime, that's one thing. Peacetime, that's somethin' else. I told you, Killraine—it's a bitch wolf eats its own whelps. Well, I aim to see it don't eat Wallace. . . ."

And now Killraine perceived the gnawing at Fanning's vitals, and he felt compassion. "Fanning, let me explain. I mean Wallace no harm. Indeed, if his story's true, incredible as it seems, I'll try to help him—"

"Help," said Fanning, and his mouth twisted. "Help from a Yankee West Point man. Oh, sure. No, Killraine. You owe me three thousand. You swap me Wallace for it, or I take it out of your hide. Here and now."

"Fanning, I don't want to—"

Fanning's eyes met his. "Dead West Pointers," he said, "don't crucify no more kids. Maybe the simplest thing is if you're dead, Killraine."

"Fanning—" Phil was seized by an instant, terrible chill.

But Fanning was coming up, was on his feet now. He backed away a pace. "Fight, you Yankee bastard!" he screamed, and his right hand clawed for his gun. "Ain't you got the guts to fight?"

Then there was no help for it. Everything happened, it seemed to Philip Killraine, with dreadful slowness. He was on his feet, chair turning over. He knew that his holster was flapped, which would slow his draw. Anyhow, he did not want to kill Carter Fanning; now that he understood the man, he felt nothing but sympathy. He wanted to buy Carter coffee and sober him up and—

But Fanning's gun was coming out of the holster.

Not swiftly, Fanning was too drunk for that; slowly, fumblingly. Its big sight caught on leather.

That gives me time, flashed through Killraine's mind and he unsnapped the flap of his own holster and found his gun. If I can just wound him, not enough to cripple but to put him out of action—

An eternity captured in seconds. The muzzle of Fanning's Colt clearing leather finally, but Killraine's gun was already up and trained and the hammer cocked. In the

shoulder, Killraine thought. He aimed for Fanning's right shoulder and pulled the trigger; and at that instant Fanning shifted weight and moved.

The bullet caught him squarely in the breastbone, smashed in, and his own gun fired into the floor, and Fanning fell, chest turning scarlet, and he drummed his heels on the floor. Killraine had one last look into his eyes: first astonished, then terrified—then dead.

In less than a pair of seconds, Carter Fanning was a corpse, and Philip Killraine, standing over him, was racked with nausea.

"Jesus," he said, swallowing hot bile. "He walked right into it. I didn't mean to kill him; he just walked into it." Then he raised his head. Men in the room were staring with eyes awed by the tragedy and mystery of sudden death.

Killraine gestured with the gun. "Someone," he croaked, "go get Marshal Wolfe."

8

The second leg of the journey was the most dangerous, and every male passenger in the coach was armed—except Dick Wallace. At Denver the stage had turned northeast, bound for Fort Sedgwick on the South Platte; this was Indian country now. Only last year, Cheyennes had burned to the ground the town of Julesburg near the

post, in retaliation for the massacre of Black Kettle's band on Sand Creek; and only the four companies of soldiers at the fort offered any challenge to their total domination of this land. Killraine had spent most of the past sixteen hours scanning the endless, folded prairie through the window, alert for any sign of war parties. Now, though, Sedgwick was only minutes away; he could relax. Shifting on the seat, he looked at the young man opposite him.

He was, Phil thought bitterly, like some curse that had been fastened on Rancho Bravo—or at least on Philip Killraine. From the beginning, his very presence had poisoned Rancho Bravo like arsenic in a spring. Now because of him, one man was dead unnecessarily; Killraine had the taking of another life on his conscience. And the shooting of Carter Fanning had driven a wedge between himself and Henry Gannon just as the breach between them had finally seemed closed.

If Henry had raged when he'd learned of Fanning's death, it might have been better. But next morning, as Killraine told him, his homely face had only settled into the flinty cast of grief, regret. "I told you to let that kid go when we reached Pueblo. I warned you this would happen."

"And I told you why it was impossible to let him go."

"So now Fanning's dead. He had his faults, but he was a good man, all said and done. He sure as hell went the distance for Rancho Bravo."

Killraine said quietly, "Would you rather it had been me?"

Gannon stared at him with circled eyes. "Don't be a fool, Phil. It didn't have to be either one of you." He went to the hotel room window, looked at the street below. "Well, it's done, now. I had my Joe Bob Yeager, you had your Carter Fanning. I only got one thing more to say. Fanning would still be alive if you had been thinking like an owner of Rancho Bravo, not like a West Point man. When you resigned your commission and joined us, from then on Rancho Bravo should have come first, not the U.S. Army."

"I can only think like the man I am," Killraine said wearily.

"I reckon. Maybe that's the trouble with all of us. Maybe if anything ever tears the outfit apart, that's what it'll be." He turned. "All right, Phil. Take your damned deserter back to Sedgwick, git shed of him once for all. I'll take the money and the wagons south and you catch us before we hit Raton Pass. We won't be travelin' fast with all that gear. Jest don't ever let me see Dick Wallace again."

That had been a week ago, and five days later when the stage pulled out for Denver, the coolness between Henry and himself not only lingered, but had deepened; indeed, it had affected some important decisions made meanwhile. Against his better judgment, Killraine had yielded on a crucial matter—how much cash was to be taken south to the Big Bend with the wagons and how much left deposited in Colorado banks.

Even now, the wagon train was rolling south and carrying a fortune in gold specie with it—a needlessly huge amount of cash, Killraine thought. A dangerous amount, big enough to invite a lot of trouble. It was putting too many of the outfit's eggs in one basket, and if something happened to that gold—

But Henry had witnessed the failure of the banks of the Confederacy, had seen whole fortunes in paper suddenly worthless; he trusted only gold and that gold where he could lay his hands on it, day or night. He was confident of his ability to defend it, and would not listen to Killraine's plan for taking only the minimum, distributing the rest in banks here and in the east. "I don't know nothing about banks and I don't trust em. Don't worry about the money. If I can get the herd from the Nueces to Pueblo, I can get the money from Pueblo to Big Bend. You just get us clear of that damned kid."

And because of Wallace, because of Fanning's death, nothing Killraine could say would change his mind.

Phil said now, "How are you riding, Wallace?"

"Okay, I guess," the boy answered tonelessly. On good food, he'd gained weight, his face was less skull-like, but

still drawn and pimply. The doctor had certified his back healed enough to stand the stagecoach journey to the fort. As it turned out, though, at Denver they had changed from a Concord to a mud wagon, with a bone-jolting wooden suspension. The ride had been a gruelling one even for Killraine, and he suspected that it had been worse for the youth. But give Wallace this: he'd not complained. Deserter or not, he possessed an unsuspected streak of courage, even dignity. He had also won a certain measure of Killraine's respect at their stopover in Denver.

"We'll be here two hours," Phil had told him. "Maybe we'd better look up your sister."

"No!" Wallace was emphatic. "No, if I got to go back, she ain't to know about it until it's finished. If they're gonna send me off to prison or shoot me, she ain't to know until there's nothin' she can do about it. I already messed up her life enough! Scared her so bad with all those letters I wrote her from the fort she gave up her honest job and—I done enough harm to her already! No matter how this comes out, I won't do no more! Maybe she'll be better off if they do stick me in a prison somewhere!"

"Wallace," Killraine said. "Get one thing straight. If your story's true, nobody's going to shoot you or stick you in a prison; I'll see to that. But if you've lied to me in any way—"

"I ain't lied! I swear I ain't! But they'll say I have at Sedgwick, and who's gonna take my word against a major's?"

"We'll see," Killraine had answered. "Now, shall we have some dinner?"

The mud wagon lurched and swayed. Then the driver's voice floated back, borne by the wind "Fort Sedgwick comin' up!"

Beside Killraine, another passenger sighed relievedly. "Finally."

But Wallace's face only paled and his long thin fingers laced and unlaced, and he had the look of a man going to his doom.

It was a new post, first called Camp Rankin, only last year elevated to the status of a fort. On a rise on the south bank of the Platte it was well-fortified, enclosed by a stockade, partly adobe, partly timber. As the stage approached, wooden gates swung open to reveal a scatter of adobe buildings around a hard-packed parade ground. Ugly and pathetic as the prospect was, Killraine felt quick emotion at the sight of the Stars and Stripes whipping atop a pole in the center of the parade. The stage entered, halted before a small building bearing the name of the feeder line; the driver jumped down and shouted: "Change here for Fort Laramie, Salt Lake City, and Californ-i-ay! Everybody out!"

Wallace's face was corpse-colored now, his Adam's apple sliding up and down his scrawny neck. "That means us," Killraine said, and took his arm. Under his hand, the young man's flesh vibrated like that of a wild bird newly captured and in terror.

Post headquarters was the biggest building, on the far side of the parade. When they entered it, a lean, dour sergeant-major with graying hair, seated behind a desk, looked up at the scrawny youth in work shirt and denims and at the shorter, muscular man beside him in cavalry officer's hat, neat civilian suit, and wearing a holstered Colt and carrying a Henry rifle. The noncom blinked; then recognition flared. "Well, I'll be damned." Thin lips opened to display bad teeth. "Wallace! Well, bucko—"

"Sergeant," Killraine cut in crisply. "My name is Philip Killraine. I have escorted this young man back to duty at his own request. He wishes to see the post commander immediately to report in person."

The sergeant's eyes shuttled to Killraine, and, recognizing tone and bearing of the professional officer, changed, registering both respect and servility. "Sir, this man is a deserter—"

"I'm aware that he has left his post. I said that he's returning voluntarily and wishes to report. I also request an interview with Major Hopper."

The sergeant licked his lips. "The Major, begging your

pardon, sir, is in his quarters at this time of day. Lieutenant Cross, post adjutant, is on duty."

"My compliments to the lieutenant, and please convey my request."

The sergeant—his name, according to a crudely lettered plaque on his desk, was Finlay—narrowed milky eyes. "A minute, Mr. Killraine." He arose, strode through another door. When he emerged, a couple of minutes later, he was followed by a tall, beefy young lieutenant whose powerful body seemed to have acquired enough recent fat to strain the seams of his uniform. Blond hair was slicked down by grease; muddy brown eyes flickered over Wallace, went to Killraine. "I'm Lieutenant Morton Cross, post adjutant." He put out his hand.

"Philip Killraine, late brevet-Major, permanent Captain, Seventh Cavalry Regiment. West Point, class of '57," he added. "Now a civilian, connected with an enterprise called Rancho Bravo." He shook Cross's big, soft hand. "I encountered Private Wallace near Pueblo. For reasons still unclear to me, he was absent from his unit and urgently requested my assistance to return; as a former officer, I was glad to oblige him."

Cross laughed, a sound made deep in his chest. "Reasons unclear, eh? Well, he's guilty on several charges, including insubordination, and striking an officer. And he's been carried on the morning report for the past three, four weeks as a deserter."

"Oh," Killraine said. "A deserter? That explains a lot. I'm glad I brought him back."

"You're glad, Captain, but he'll be damned sorry. Anyhow, we're grateful to you. Sergeant Finlay! Take this man to the guard house and put him in irons! Major Hopper and I will deal with him later!"

Wallace whirled on Killraine. "Captain—"

"Be quiet!" Killraine snapped. "If you're really a deserter, you'll take your medicine. I've heard a lot of wild stories from you, but now everything is coming clear."

"Captain, for God's sake—"

"Be quiet!" Killraine roared, staring into his eyes, try-

ing to give him a message that was in his mind. "Don't you open your mouth again! You understand?" He whirled on Finlay. "Sergeant, take this man away! If there's one thing I despise, it's a deserter!"

Finlay's lips curled to show bad teeth again. He drew his sidearm. "All right, young soldier. On your way. And no bad moves, understand?"

"Captain—" Wallace began again, but Killraine cut him off, cold and hard.

"Go along," he said.

"And Sergeant," Cross added. "On your way back—my compliments to Major Hopper. Inform him of Captain Killraine's arrival and convey my request that he meet us in the officer's mess at his convenience."

"Yes, sir," said Finlay, and he thrust the gun hard against Wallace's back. "Move out, bucko."

Wallace flinched, more from anxiety than pain. He cast one last despairing glance at Killraine, opened his mouth, closed it again, and then, under the threat of Finlay's Colt, marched along.

"More champagne, Captain? Lieutenant Cross! Captain Killraine's glass is empty!"

"Well, we'll soon fix that, sir." Cross went to the olla suspended by a chain from the ceiling, in which the three bottles of champagne had been placed to cool. It was well after taps, and Killraine and the two officers were alone in the mess now. Killraine accepted as Cross poured his glass full and turned once more to Major Hopper.

Justin Hopper, class of '47, had once been handsome, but whiskey bloat—Killraine's diagnosis, anyway—marred his features and made him look much older than his forty-two years. He had sandy hair, pale blue eyes, and he stank as if he had not bathed in quite a while. That, Killraine thought, was fairly inexcusable with the Platte so near.

Still, Hopper was a man of the world, intelligent, articulate, shrewd, and a charming conversationalist, and, judging from his outpouring of words, a damned good book-soldier if not a practical one. He had obviously

been asleep when summoned by the sergeant, but he greeted Killraine effusively and like a long-lost brother. That was not surprising, because any new face on a remote post like this was an event, especially if it belonged to another officer. Hopper had given Killraine the royal treatment, had coffee with him, then with Cross trailing behind and two steps to the left, had taken him on a tour of the post. It was neat and clean and tautly run; and, Killraine thought, it reeked of fear and tension. But he had not remarked on that; he had only complimented Hopper on the cleanliness of the stables and the uniform discipline and military courtesy of the men, which were impeccable. He had inspected the guard with Hopper at retreat, and chills had run down his spine as the bugler sounded "To the Colors" while the flag came down and the sunset gun boomed its blank charge.

The evening meal in the mess, at Hopper's table, had been superb, and the champagne had flowed freely. Still, Killraine could not help noting a certain sullenness and tension in the junior officers to whom he was introduced; it was as if everyone on this post were suspicious of his neighbor. And that, he thought, on a frontier post where each man's life might depend on his fellow officer's performance, was a tainted situation. The whole afternoon had only deepened his conviction that something was badly wrong here at Fort Sedgwick, but he had been careful to betray no evidence of that conviction.

Hopper's intake of champagne had done nothing to reassure him. The major was more than relaxed, he was drunk, as he hit the table with his hand and the sound echoed through the empty room. "I tell you, Cap'n, 'til you've pulled this kinda duty, you got no idea what it's like! Discipline! How the hell you keep discipline? Here we are, two hundred miles from nowhere, and since the goddamn gut-eating Indians burned Julesburg, no place for the men to go! And you know it's true, especially in the army, the devil finds work for idle hands! You got to keep 'em busy, always busy! Paintin', shovelin', diggin', cleanin'—and still there isn't enough work to go around!"

Killraine bit the end off a cigar. "What about patrolling?"

"Well, of course we patrol. Not as much as we'd like to, but I have to take into consideration the inexperience of the men and the junior officers. And I can't lead every patrol myself! A post like this takes a lot of administration, too, y'know, and that's important. And then there's training—" He leaned forward, wagged a finger. "Cap'n, you wouldn't believe what they send me nowadays and call soldiers! In your day and mine, they wouldn't have been worth their rations and their pay! Kids, just kids, like that Wallace—"

"I take it Wallace wasn't a good soldier."

"A good—He couldn't even ride! He damn near fell off his horse right in front of Sheridan! 'Magine how that made me look! Like all the rest . . . Wallace couldn't do anything right!"

Killraine nodded, found cigars, passed them around. When they were lit and going, he said, "I can understand how discipline could really be a problem, yes. Of course, I'm no longer on active duty, and it's a situation new to me. If I were commander of this post, though, I imagine I'd emphasize patrolling, try to stir up a skirmish with the Indians . . . and, of course, I'd lead as many patrols as possible myself. And I'd try to give the men a sense of purpose, too. After all, this is the firing line, the only post between Laramie and Sumner; and if it goes, the Indians take it all. I'd try to make them feel that they were the elite just because they were sent here, that what they did was twice as important as anything anybody did on a spit-and-polish post back East. That they were all picked men, the cream—But, of course, why should I tell an officer of your experience this? You've surely already thought of it."

" 'Course I've thought of it," Hopper said thickly. "But you can't do those things until you establish discipline, Killraine. Discipline, that's th' first requirement of any post—"

"Naturally," Killraine said. "I imagine it's very taut here."

Cross laughed hoarsely. "Taut? Don't you ever doubt it!"

"You damn right it's taut," Hopper said earnestly. "Thass what I concentrate on. Can't do nothin 'till I whip men into line."

"Whip? Of course, you don't mean that literally."

Cross chuckled and Hopper laughed phlegmily. "You think not? How else you bring a man around on a post like this? Killraine, you're a profeshnul too. You know enlisted men. Jest like cattle. You got to beat and drive 'em . . . and if they come at you, beat 'em some more. . . . You say you're in the cattle business, you must know. . . ."

Killraine thought of the stag, of Carter Fanning. But a man was not a steer. "Well, you certainly must have given Dick Wallace a good dose of the whip."

Hopper sat up straight, blinked owlishly. "Well, Cross here, on my orders, gave him a hundred of the best, yeah. After all, he *hit* me! He hit his commanding officer!"

"Dreadful," Killraine said. "I can't imagine why."

"Well, I'll tell you why! He couldn't take his medicine. He's nothing but a foul-up, you understand? He lost two cartridges at target practice, spifically against my orders that all rounds must be accounted for. . . . So I had his troop commander give him company punishment. . . ."

"Extra guard duty," Killraine said.

Hopper chuckled. "We don't operate that way out here. Not with the buncha untrained hellions we got. No. I had him sentenced to—"

"Begging the major's pardon," Cross cut in, significance in his voice, "but it's getting very late."

"Hush, lieutenant. Not often I get a chance to talk with a man understands my problems. Extra guard's nothin'! Not for a man out here. No! You got to hurt him! I had him spread-eagled on the parade for half a day! Let the sun do it, let the flies and buff'lo gnats chew on him a while. And let every soldier on the post see him there! Then we let him up and that's when the fool hit me, and I had Cross—"

"Major Hopper," Cross snapped.

"Lay on a hundred of the best. With a freighter's whip!

With the whole post called out to watch!" Hopper shook his head. "Then Wallace just disappeared. Some soft-hearted civilians on the post musta smuggled him out. But now you brought him back, Cap'n." Hopper actually patted Killraine's hand. "I hope you'll be around tomorrow. You'll see how we treat deserters here at Sedgwick. We'll give him another dose of the parade, let him look up at the sun a while. Then another twenty-five of the best. I'd order more laid on, but I think more'n twenty-five would be unwise just now. Don't want t'injure him permanently, just impress the other young soldiers. You understand, Captain Killraine?"

"Of course I do, Major," Killraine said, and he stood up, belly clenched with disgust and rage. He took the cigar from his mouth, looked from Hopper to Cross and back again. "I understand exactly. Until now, I couldn't conceive of Wallace's story being true, but obviously it is. And I understand this, too: neither of you is fit to water a decent private's horse. And now, gentlemen, I inform you that you will neither spread-eagle nor whip Wallace in the morning, nor lay hands on him in any way. And I further inform you that I intend to report a true account of conditions here at Sedgwick to the high command in Washington and see that it has your respective arses—every scrap of them!"

For a moment no one moved or spoke as, spraddle-legged, Killraine faced them, body trembling slightly with controlled fury. Hopper sat up straight, face paling to a mottled, fishy hue, jaw dropping. "Now hold on, Captain—"

"He's not a captain!" Cross snapped. "He's a damned civilian, and he thinks he's gulled us and taken us into camp!" Huge, beefy, he confronted Killraine. "Well, you're not as smart as you think you are, *Mister* Killraine. It's your word against ours and—"

"And Dick Wallace's testimony, and that of every other soldier on the post when the inspector general comes." Killraine's smile was totally devoid of humor. "And he will come, Lieutenant; of that I assure you. I may no longer

be a serving officer, but I have certain connections still that I'll not hesitate to use in a case like this. There is no place for you or Mr. Cross in the service, Major Hopper. I will see that you two leave it—voluntarily or otherwise."

"You'll play hell, you little pipsqueak!" Lieutenant Cross almost roared. "You'll—"

But Hopper was on his feet now, face doughy, but somehow mustering a semblance of defiance. "At ease, Mr. Cross!" With visible effort, he forced his eyes to meet Killraine's.

"I think you're unwise to make threats in your present situation," he said, trying hard to be cool and ominous. "I'll remind you, sir, that here on this post you're under my jurisdiction and subject to military arrest. Further, such threats can only work against the interest of the prisoner, Wallace, for whom you profess such concern."

Killraine smiled. "In other words, you'll arrest me, work me over as well as Wallace, is that it?"

"I'm only saying you'd do well to exercise caution."

Killraine chuckled, a thoroughly unpleasant sound. "Caution has never been my long suit, Major. Go ahead, do your worst. I feel it fair to warn you, though, that if I do not rejoin Rancho Bravo before it crosses Raton Pass, my partner, Mr. Gannon, and a dozen Texas cowboys, as well as Marshal Wolfe from Pueblo, will be here to find out why."

"And maybe they'll find the Injuns got you—or you took a swim in the Platte and drowned," Cross put in. "Sad, regrettable, but an everyday occurrence around here."

"That's true," Killraine said. "That could happen, easily. In which case, of course, my sister Evelyn would wire the whole sad story to our nearest relative, our uncle. Who," he added, biting off each word with relish, "happens to be the senior senator from Connecticut and would, of course, demand a complete investigation of the whole affair."

Hopper blinked rapidly; his jowls seemed to sag. "Senator—Senator Morton is your uncle?"

"My mother's brother. I've never called on him for a

favor yet, but in this case I wouldn't hesitate. You have just threatened to destroy me, gentlemen. Well, it shall be my pleasure, one way or the other, to destroy you."

"I. . . . Hold on." Hopper's voice shook. "Captain Killraine, we've all been hasty. I'm sure we can reach some accommodation. I'll dismiss any charges against Wallace."

"Go on," Killraine said.

"And . . ."—Hopper hesitated—"I— If he wants out, I'll put up the money to buy him out myself and see that he gets an honorable discharge."

"No," Killraine said. "You'll release him, yes, but I'll buy him out. He'll not be under obligation to you."

"Very well. It'll be irregular, but we could handle the whole matter tonight, in time for you to catch the midnight stage back to Denver, if that's your wish."

"It is," Killraine said.

Hopper sighed with relief. "Then that's settled."

"Not quite," Killraine said. "It still affords no protection to the other men on the post, or the service itself."

"For God's sake, man, what more do you want? Our very blood?'

"No," Killraine said. "Your resignations." His voice crackled. "I'll make no deal that involves your staying on active duty, either of you. You and Mr. Cross will resign from the service immediately. You will submit your resignations in the next dispatch pouch east. You will send a copy of both resignations to Fort Sumner, New Mexico, to me as private mail, and I will pick them up when our wagon train passes through there. Sixty days later, I will inquire again at Sumner, and if you are not off this post by then, I shall submit a complete account of the Wallace affair to Washington, including Lieutenant Cross's threats of murder. In short, gentlemen, you may leave the service voluntarily, with some shreds of reputation intact, or I will have you thrown out bodily, no matter how long it takes or how much it costs—and I am financially able, as well as physically and mentally to do that promptly. So, there are my terms. I trust they're clear. I want Wallace and your resignations; and during the weeks that you re-

main in command here, you had better damned well walk a chalk line or all bets are off."

He ground out his cigar. "I think we understand each other."

"Captain Killraine—" Hopper began, but Cross pushed him aside.

"Shut up!" the big lieutenant roared. "You've run your whiskey mouth long enough. I'll handle this now! Killraine, you talk big, but I've had enough of talk! There ain't but one way to deal with you, and by God—" He clubbed a fist.

Killraine looked up at him, smile fixed. "Major Hopper," he said quietly. "Are we alone? No enlisted men in here with us?"

"No, and—"

"Good," Killraine said. Then, with every ounce of strength, he hit Cross in the belly.

His fist sank deep through flab; he heard, felt, Cross's outwhooshing breath. In the same instant, he pivoted with the speed of a fighting cock, and Cross's huge fist whizzed by his ear, missing completely. Killraine came up on his toes, and his right was already on the way. It caught Cross squarely on the nose, and Killraine felt cartilage give beneath his fist. Cross bawled as blood gushed and pain blinded him, and Killraine smashed him in the mouth, cutting lips. Cross reeled back, shook his head, spraying blood, bellowed again and came for Killraine.

Taller than Phil by half a foot, outweighing him by forty pounds, he had a bull's or grizzly's power, but no speed at all. Killraine was in the best physical shape of his life after the long drive, and though Cross connected with a glancing blow on the shoulder, that was all, and Phil hardly felt it. He ducked in under Cross's guard and his fists drove blurred, rhythmic hammer-blows into Cross's gut and chest. Cross whooshed a gout of blood and clubbed Killraine between the shoulder blades, and Killraine, jolted, only laughed and hit Cross twice more. He drove Cross back against a table, and the man brought up a shielding knee. Killraine bounced around it as if his legs were made of metal springs, found an opening,

caught his balance, gathered force. His fist slammed against the point of the lieutenant's jaw with every ounce of wiry strength his body possessed. Cross's teeth clicked and Cross's head whipped back; and then Cross, unconscious, was sliding to the floor. Killraine turned, hand instinctively going to holster, but Hopper only stood there, appalled, uncertain, twisting his hands together.

Cross hit with a jar that shook the room. Killraine glanced at him, saw that he would not be moving for a while. Still caught up in combat fever, he took a step toward Major Hopper. "Well, sir?" he said, and it came out a snarl.

Hopper backed away. "Captain, for God's sake—" He shot a wild look at Cross. The junior officer's defeat had drained him of all starch, defiance. "Please, no—"

"My terms?" Killraine rasped.

"I—I—" Hopper's pale face worked. Then his whole body sagged. "Insofar as I'm concerned," he whispered, "they are met."

9

"Free!" Dick Wallace said it for the hundredth time, as the mud wagon rattled into Denver. "I can't believe it! Jeez, I'm free! Wait'll Jenny hears!"

He leaned across the space between the seats, pawed at

Killraine's knee. "Cap'n, I swear I'll pay you back. I don't care if it takes my whole life, I'll pay you back!"

Killraine drew his leg way. Wallace had been going on like this all the way from Sedgwick, and Killraine was tired of it and a little sickened. He felt smeared, dirtied by the whole affair, and there was nothing more he wanted now than to see the last of this skinny, pimply youth who was no more entitled to respect as a soldier than the officers whom he had forced Killraine to ruin. "Just let it ride, Wallace. You don't owe me anything."

"I owe you everything! Oh, wait'll I find Jenny, wait'll she hears! Cap'n, she'll be so grateful to you—"

Killraine turned away, looked out the coach's window at the streets of Denver. It was almost like being back in the East—solid buildings of red-burnt brick, painted lumber; well-dressed men and decent women on the streets, almost outnumbering miners and frontiersmen. Still, he felt no desire to linger here; he wanted to be back with Rancho Bravo.

Nevertheless, he supposed he would spend a day here and become familiar with the city and what it had to offer. This was no fly-by-night boom town, but built to last, and it would dominate Colorado Territory for a long time and be important to the future of Rancho Bravo. Someday certainly, a railroad would reach it, and then maybe it would feed the outfit's cattle to the East.

But the first thing was to find Wallace's sister and turn him over to her, be shed of him as Gannon said. The coach rolled to a stop: Killraine and the boy disembarked.

"All right," he said, once they were on the wooden sidewalk. He sucked in high, pure air that seemed to have a unique flavor of its own. "You know where to find her?"

Wallace picked up his own possibles and Killraine's leather suitcase. "I ain't sure. The last word I had from her, she had a job singin' and dancin' at some place down by the creek. I . . . I think it's called the Auraria Jamboree. Anyhow—" he swallowed hard "—they got a girlie show there."

"Very well. Let's check our gear and then we'll see." He glanced toward the west; the sun had already disappeared behind the mountains. In most cities, such a show would not start until after nightfall, but here it might run around the clock.

He got directions from the clerk in the stageline office as to how to find the place.

Despite its fine view of the Shining Mountains, Denver itself was a city of the plains, where Cherry Creek joined the Platte, and it was almost treeless save for a fringe of cottonwoods along the waterways. The first gold-hunters had founded Auraria on the west bank of Cherry Creek, latecomers had founded Denver on the other bank; eventually, the two had merged. As always in these Western towns, Killraine noted wryly, half the buildings seemed occupied by saloons and dance halls. Tinny music and loud laughter whanged out at them as they went down to the bottoms of Cherry Creek, passing from the better type of bars and hurdy-gurdy places to the less appetizing ones.

Presently, they found the Auraria Jamboree. Outside its door, a ferret-faced man in a cheap suit passed out cardboard tokens to all comers and rattled off a spiel: "One free drink for everybody, on the house. Right inside, folks, hottest show in Denver! Girls, girls, nothing but girls, for your pleasure and entertainment. What they don't show, what they don't wave, I couldn't mention anyhow! Featuring the incomparable Mademoiselle Jenny la Touche, brought to you dye-rect from Paris, France! Here you are, friends, just give the barkeep these, you get one free shot of fine rye whiskey. . . ."

Dick Wallace looked at the scabby building, the weasel-faced barker, and he swallowed hard. "Jenny la Touche—Cap'n Killraine, you think—"

Killraine shrugged off a touch of pity. "I don't know. Let's go in and see."

The place was like a barn, with a good crowd of miners in dirty clothes, but few men in suits. It smelled of whiskey, beer, sweat, and smoke. At the far end there was a small stage, with a piano and a trombone-player in

front of it. Killraine saw a vacant table near the piano, down front, and led Wallace to it. They gave the tokens to the waiter and he brought rye. Killraine took one sip of his, set it down, and shook his head at Wallace. "Don't drink that poison."

The young man, wall-eyed, was looking all around. "Jeez, cap'n, let's go. There's gotta be some mistake. Jenny would never work in a crummy hole like this. . . ."

"No, we'll stay and see," Killraine said. "Then—" His words were lost in a kind of fanfare blared by the trombone-player and everyone turned toward the stage where a fat man in a horse-blanket-patterned suit raised his arms, his smile showing bright gold teeth. "Folks, it is with great pleasure that the Auraria Jamboree brings you the hottest show you ever laid your lamps on! We've all heard the talk about the beef that's come to Pueblo! Well, I'll tell you, you won't see no more meat down there than you will right here! Now, for your delectation and delight, the daring members of our onsomble and the star of our show, the international favorite of the crowned heads of Yurrope—Mamzelle Jenny la Touche!"

As he raced off stage, the musicians struck up a lively polka. Killraine gawked as four beefy girls in the scantiest costumes he had ever seen—their legs were naked, not even clad in tights—joggled, prancing, onstage. Smiling mechanically, they bent forward to show their breasts, capered, turned, bent against to present their rumps. Wallace made a sound of sickness in his throat. Killraine did not blame him. "She's not one of those?"

"No. But—" He broke off as the trombone blared another fanfare, then played a cakewalk. The girls faced front. And then she came, strutting onstage, waving a man's derby hat, and the crowd roared, and Dick Wallace moaned: "Oh, Gawd. Cap'n Killraine, that's *her!*"

Philip Killraine hardly heard him. He was staring at the girl.

With a brassy, total assurance, she strutted to the center of the stage, bent, waved the derby, twirled the cane in her other hand, tossed the derby and caught it on the cane and then threw kisses to the tumultuous audience.

Then the musicians struck up the cakewalk again, and still throwing kisses, she strutted once more, around the stage.

Any sort of stage show, and especially dance hall cabarets, were considered the devil's work where Killraine came from; and participants in them were far beyond redemption. Nevertheless, everything faded from his consciousness as he watched the fallen woman, Jenny la Touche—Jenny Wallace—go into her act. He had never witnessed anything like this before— it seemed impossible that so small a woman could radiate so much energy and magnetism, such total sensuality.

But she did. Not much over five feet tall, she seemed all long, naked legs, lush breasts nearly overflowing the black corset that, save for short skirt, high-buttoned spike-heeled boots and a scarf around her neck, was her only attire.

Lovely as her body was, her face held Killraine's attention. Her forehead was high, her eyes, with the emphasis of paint, were great, green flares; her cheekbones were wide, chin pointed, mouth a scarlet fullness, the nose above it short and tilted; and a great, shining fall of coppery hair reached, swirling, gleaming, nearly to her buttocks. She capered, pranced, strutted, postured, showing off her body with evident delight, then sang two heart-wrenchers of the kind favored by men far from home, rendered in a husky contralto vibrating with sadness and nostalgia. Then she blared forth two music-hall ballads in a brassy voice that shook the room like a trumpet's blare, indeed, like a whole marching band. Killraine could not imagine how one small body could give forth that much sound. However she managed it, all he knew was that he was totally enchanted, stirred mentally and physically, and so was every other man in the room as she gathered in the audience like a teamster picking up his lines, then bent the men in the room to her will as if they were so many tame, trained animals. . . .

And then, in twenty minutes, it was over. Sweat gleaming on pale powdered skin, Jenny Wallace bent forward

provocatively, threw kisses as she straightened up, ran offstage. She came back half a dozen times before the applause subsided. Killraine, to his own amazement, found himself on his feet, hammering his hands together. Then he caught Dick's Wallace's eye and sank back into his chair.

The chorus came down off the stage to mingle with the customers, but Jenny had disappeared. "I'm going to find her," Wallace said thickly and, springing up, disappeared into the crowd. Watching him go, Killraine felt pity for him: the boy could not cut it as a soldier and now his sister was a fallen woman. Surely a doomed family if there ever was one.

Killraine shoved aside the undrinkable rye, motioned for the waiter, ordered a beer. The chorus girls were dancing with the customers now. When the schooner was set before him, Phil sipped from it, settled back. He did not even want to imagine the reunion between Wallace and his sister. He took another drink of beer. Then from behind him, a deep voice said his name.

Killraine twisted in his chair. The man who'd spoken shoved out of the crowd, came around to face him; and there was no way Phil could have forgotten those bullet-colored eyes, that shock of dirty yellow hair, big blob of nose, thick lips, or towering, rawboned frame. This was the oldest son of Jethro Lawrence, Bud.

He stood there above Phil now, rocking back and forth on his heels, eyes squinted. "Hello, Mr. Lawrence," Killraine said.

"You didn't come to us," But Lawrence said, voice gutteral and thick. "We told you where we was at, but you never come."

"No," Killraine said. "Of course I didn't. I closed a deal with Mr. Conroy."

"Conroy!" Lawrence said the name as if it were obscene, laughed ropily. Then he sobered, staring at Killraine with those gray, opaque eyes. "Well, you oughta dealt with us. You done made a bad mistake."

"It's not my first one," Killraine said.

Lawrence thought about that. "You can still make it up. Daddy and the others done gone back to Raven's Camp. But I'll be around a spell, and I got authority to act."

"I appreciate it," Killraine said, "but it's too late. The fat is in the fire."

Bud Lawrence dragged the back of one huge hand across his mouth. "Shor'n hell is, and you better not forgit it." He had, Killraine saw, a lot of liquor on board. But was not, thank God, in a fighting mood. Killraine had had enough of barroom brawls, liquored-up combat, since hitting Colorado. "You jest don't fergit it," Lawrence said, and then he turned away, shoved through the crowd, ripped one of the girls from the embrace of a much smaller man, and, more like a trained bear than a human, began to dance with her.

Killraine watched him until other bodies hid him from sight. Damn it, where was Wallace? He turned in his chair, then sat up straight: Dick was coming toward him, and his sister, now fully dressed, was on his arm.

Killraine stood up, staring at the girl. She seemed a totally different person from the one he'd seen capering on stage not long ago.

Her hair was put up now, pinned into a great mass of copper on which rode a perky hat with a feather in it. She wore a demure ruffled blouse, a long skirt, and a linen duster over both. The makeup had been scrubbed from her face: the color in her cheeks and lips was natural. And, he thought, something leaping involuntarily in him, she was even more arresting than she had been painted and half nude. Carrying herself with a dancer's grace, she looked at him with huge, green eyes, frank, friendly, and only a little touched with apprehension, as if a trifle afraid that his verdict on her might be unfavorable.

"Captain Killraine," Dick Wallace said, with mingled pride and strain. "This is my sister, Jenny."

"Miss Wallace." Killraine moved his hat and bowed.

"Captain." With poise, she put out a hand and he took it; he found it soft, small, warm.

Holding it perhaps a second longer than was necessary, he said, "Won't you sit down?"

"I'd rather not. Maybe we could get out of here. You and I and Dick, we've got a lot to talk about. This ain't much of a place to do it in. Another girl and I, we got a house right down the creek; she's still working, but I'm off for the night now. Maybe we could go there. I'll fix some coffee and some supper if you'd like some."

It never entered Killraine's mind to refuse; after all, the matter of Dick Wallace must be disposed of. "As you please, ma'am."

"You see." Dick crowed. "I told you, he's a real fly gentleman!"

They pushed through the crowd and had almost made the door when someone pawed at Jenny's shoulder. "Hey, Jen—" Bud Lawrence half blocked her path. "Where you goin'? And what you doin' with this tinhorn? You got another show tonight."

"Sorry, Bud, honey." Jenny gave him a melting look, patted his hand. "Did an extra show last night and I'm off tonight. Catch my act tomorrow; I'm savin' a special kiss just to throw to you."

"Damn well better," Lawrence grinned. "Jenny—" But with amazing deftness she'd slipped free and they were out on the street.

There, all semblance of a smile left her face. "Damn big buffalo. But he's a spender, and I got to be halfway nice. You two know each other, Mr. Killraine?"

"Only slightly," Killraine answered dryly.

"Slightly's the best way to know him. I didn't figure him for your kind of man." Then, quite naturally, she slid her arm through Killraine's, laid her hand on his wrist. "This way. It's not far."

"I—" But before he could think of anything to say, she went on. Her speaking voice was the husky contralto he'd heard in the first two songs, not the brassy trumpet blare of the last ones. "Dick's told me everything you've done

for him. The money—I can pay part of it tonight and I'll send on the rest later. But the other part of it. . . . I don't know how we'll pay you."

"I want no pay of any kind." He was acutely aware of her hand on his, the brush of her hip against him, the stirring, fragrant perfume she wore. It required an effort to focus his thoughts, find words. "All I ask is his cooperation in making affidavits I can use to pry Cross and Hopper out of the army."

"He'll do anything he can for you," she answered. "He thinks you lit the sun and hung the moon. Right now, I feel about the same way. I—" She broke off, pointing to a cabin across the street. "There it is, what there is of it."

Solidly built, it was small, consisting of a single room, which, when Jenny Wallace lit the lamp, was not at all what Killraine had expected. Vaguely he'd anticipated something full of plush and satin, a kind of sinful den; instead the place was sparsely furnished, almost austere, despite a few pathetic efforts at decoration, and scrupulously clean. There were two beds neatly made and coverleted, a big rag doll on one, some china on a shelf above the wood stove, and a table, a few chairs, some magazines, and some feminine bric-a-brac. Only a pair of female undergarments draped on a chair-back made Killraine's brows lift, and Jenny instantly put them away.

"Dick, there's plenty of wood and ought to be some coals. Build up the fire and I'll make a pot of coffee and cook some supper. Captain, take a chair." She unpinned her hat, put it on a shelf covered by a hanging curtain. When she turned, she had a bottle and a glass in her hand. "I don't drink myself, and I hope Dick don't either. But my girl friend likes her toddy, and she won't mind if I borrow a little." Before Killraine could protest, she poured him a healthy drink, while Dick worked to build a fire. Then she put the bottle back.

Killraine sipped the whiskey, found it decent. "This is a nice place," he said, for lack of any other observation.

Jenny Wallace hung up her duster. "It's a lot better than the hole Dick and me lived in off the Bowery. A lot of the girls, they live upstairs at the Jamboree you know,

but that's not for me and Frenchie. We are chantooses, you know, performers, and that's all we're paid to do, and all we do." Turning, she looked directly at Killraine. "You understand?" she said, almost fiercely.

"Of course I do," Killraine answered, though to him it was a negligible distinction.

"Then good. I just wanted to make that clear." She brushed back a wisp of hair that had escaped. Then, face reddening, she turned away, pans clanking and banging as she took them from the shelf.

"You can't get beef here for love nor money, but I got some ham and some real fresh eggs. That and fried potatoes all right?"

"Miss Wallace," Killraine said. "Please don't go to any trouble on my account."

"Well, it ain't a patch to the trouble you went to on ours. The least you can let me do is feed you." She turned, smiled, and added, "I'm so happy I could kiss you, but somehow I think you'd rather I thanked you with a meal."

Feeling the warmth of blood in his face, Killraine said, "Ham and eggs will be just fine."

Jenny Wallace laughed, a sound which started husky in her chest, then rose into a silvery finish. "I can tell you ain't been in Colorado long!"

Full, Killraine leaned back in his chair and sighed. "May I smoke?"

"I guess so. Nobody ever asked my permission before."

Phil laughed; and suddenly he realized it was the first really mirthful, full-throated laugh that had come out of him in days. But somehow it was easy to laugh around Jenny Wallace; easy to relax, too. Strange, but her very frankness, her complete ignorance of the polite formalities, drew the tensions from a man. The fine meal and superb coffee hadn't hurt, either. He took out a cigar, offered it to Dick Wallace.

The boy shook his head, grinning at Jenny. "She'd murder me if she seen me smoke."

"A good habit not to start." Killraine lit the cheroot. Dick leaned forward across the table.

"Cap'n, how much did you pay to buy me out?"

Killraine sat up, shook his head. "Don't worry about it."

"No. Jenny and I got to know. We got to pay you back."

"I had my own reasons for doing it. You know what a good price I got for the herd in Pueblo, so I can afford it. Please, let's not discuss it."

"No," Jenny said, "Dick's right. We got to talk about it. We owe a debt to you and the Wallaces always pay their debts." She arose, went to a trunk at the foot of one of the beds, took a key ring from her bosom, unlocked it.

"I ain't been able to save too much," she said. "Not near as much as I hoped to. I could have made more if I'd worked upstairs at the Jamboree, but I think if I'da . . . well, bought Dick out that way, he'da thrown the money back in my face. And it costs like fire to live in Denver, Captain. You wouldn't believe what Frenchie and me have to pay for this cabin. But—" She put the money on the table. "There's a hundred and twenty dollars. I've saved that much in three months; if we scrimp I can send you about that much again by Christmas."

Killraine arose. "Miss Wallace, please. I've already said I will not—"

Dick laid his hand on his sister's arm, also standing. "Sis, don't worry. I'll take care of what we owe the captain. Captain Killraine, when you ride south, I want to go with you. I want you to give me a job on Rancho Bravo. I don't care what kinda job it is, or what you pay, just gimme any kinda job. And then you take my wages until the debt's paid with interest."

Killraine looked at him, and the thought of being saddled with Wallace for one day longer than necessary actually made him ill.

"I'm sorry, Dick. I doubt there'll be any jobs available."

"No jobs?" Wallace blinked. "I know all about your outfit. You've already lost one man anyhow, that Fan-

ning. You're bound to need some more help. Cap'n, please. I *want* to work for Rancho Bravo!"

"No," Killraine said. He sought a way to let the boy down easily, hoped he'd found it. "Dick, you've seen the outfit on the move—the last day or so, anyhow. We're a cattle company, which means men work in the saddle. Every man has to be a superb horseman. And . . . well, I'm afraid that's where all your trouble in the army comes from. You yourself admit you're afraid of horses and are no rider."

Wallace opened and shut his mouth. "I can learn," he said at last.

"I'm sure you can," Killraine answered. "But you'll get killed trying to learn on the job with Rancho Bravo; believe me—" he thought of the stag, his own missed throw "—I know."

"But I *got* to —Cap'n, you don't understand. It ain't just to pay you back. Jeez, it's somethin' else, somethin' I don't know how to say. But . . . it's what I *want,* you understand? The only thing I ever really wanted. I ain't no rider, no, but I can learn. And you remember one thing—ride or not, they never had no better shot on the whole post than me! I'm the only one that ever scored two possibles in a row at target practice. I beat out Cross and Hopper both, and Finlay too; that's partly where the real trouble come from!"

Killraine was intrigued. "And where'd you learn to shoot?"

"Well the army taught me, that's all. I never even *held* a gun 'til I signed on! But they said that was good 'cause I had no bad habits to unlearn. Anyhow, I don't know! All I know is maybe I can't stick on a horse, but I can hit anything I aim at with a rifle, and I don't give a damn how far. Sure you can use a man like that on Rancho Bravo, with all those Injuns to fight every day!"

"The idea is to live with the Indians, not fight them." Killraine caught a glimpse from the corner of his eye of Jenny's face; it was set, hard, and she wagged her head in a desperate no, and her gaze was pleading with Killraine.

He sighed, blew smoke. "We can use marksmen, yes. But those marksmen have to be good riders, too. Besides, your sister needs you now. She didn't come all the way out here at great sacrifice to herself to see you head for Texas just after you've been reunited." He laid down the cigar in a sardine can that served as an ashtray. "Let's leave it at this, Dick. As soon as the snow thaws on Raton Pass next spring, Rancho Bravo will have another herd in Pueblo. If you're still out west and have taught yourself to ride, come see me, and maybe we can work something out."

"I—" But Jenny cut in. "Dick, that's enough. Captain Killraine is absolutely right. Besides, I'll pay what you owe. Captain, will you please take this money?"

Killraine looked at it, looked at her, and then he knew that he had no alternative. "Thank you, Miss Wallace. We will consider that this squares all debts."

Dick pouted like an angry child. "I pay my own debts!"

Jenny Wallace arose, went to the closet, drew back the curtain, put on her duster. Then she clapped her hat on her head, went to a mirror, pinned it, while both men watched. With it in place, she turned. "Captain Killraine, perhaps you would like to stroll along Cherry Creek for your digestion's sake." Her expression was urgent, begging. "Dick will tend the fire and make sure it doesn't go out, so we can have coffee when we come back."

"Now, sis—"

"You heard me!" Jenny whirled on him. "Captain Killraine wants to take a walk! You stay here and watch the fire!" Then she pirouetted and offered her arm. "Captain, shall we go?"

Above them, the leaves of drought-bitten cottonwoods made a nervous rustle. Higher still than that, the sky was enormous, spangled with stars. In the distance, the dark hump of the Chicago Peaks was a greater blackness. The South Platte River, neither wide nor deep here, gurgled near at hand as Philip Killraine and Jenny Wallace sat on a log on the riverbank.

Normally Phil Killraine had a mechanism in his mind, triggered by position of sun or stars, that would tell him time by dead reckoning within ten minutes. Right now he had no idea whether it was an hour before midnight or an hour after, because somehow the presence of Jenny Wallace had destroyed time. Walking along the creek and river, talking with her, time no longer had a meaning.

Killraine was filled with wonder. This was something for which there was no accounting. He had the eerie sensation that he had fumbled through a thousand keys to find the one to unlock his future and now held it in his hand. There was a part of him lost before he'd been born; he had been sent aquesting after it and somehow, by a miracle, had found it. That, of course, to any thinking, rational man was absurd, and above all else, Phil Killraine was rational. And, once more, he reminded himself that this was no lady worthy of his affections: this was a dance hall girl he had only met tonight, and he had been too long away from women, and that accounted for it all.

Or did it? She was no ordinary percentage-taking painted cat; the longer they had walked and talked, the greater the depth he had sensed beneath her surface. He knew all about the Wallace family now, and it was a harrowing story.

Bearers of a hallowed Highland name, it had come from Scotland when Jenny was a babe in arms and Dick, five years younger, still unborn. Her father was proud and poor and spoke so thick a Highland dialect he could never be understood; he found a job in a brewery. One day a pile of barrels rolled; he was crushed and killed beneath them. Her mother, tubercular, died not long after.

Jenny was fourteen then and Dick was nine. Fourteen-year-old prostitutes were no novelty in New York, and that was a route she could have taken; but she did not.

Talking more frankly than he had ever heard a woman speak, she told him that two factors had saved her: one was the fierce Wallace Highland pride, the other was the fact that her mother was an expert seamstress and had taught her all her skills.

Killraine said, incredulously, "You mean that at the age of fourteen you undertook not only to raise Dick, but to *support* him?"

"Well, somebody had to do it."

Killraine was silent: this was a whole side of life he knew nothing of.

"But you can't make anything sewing," she said. "And anyhow, I had this . . . kind of dream, you see? I don't know where it came from, but all my life I've sung and danced. And I kept thinking that someday I'd go into a show on Broadway, when I got old enough. But. . . ." She stared out at the water. "You get old awfully fast in a sweatshop. And the time came when. . . . Dick was running loose, going to the dogs, and—I don't know. We just needed more money. We had to have more. And I decided that if I didn't stand a chance, I'd give him one, anyhow. I mean, I know it's a big thing to you nice, respectable people who've never gone hungry, but when you've worked all day, seven days a week, and you still don't have enough to cook a supper and heat the room there are some things that don't seem so bad. Some ways out that finally you have got to take."

"Miss Wallace," Killraine said, not wanting to hear more.

"Jenny, please, Captain Killraine."

"Very well. Jenny and Phil. You didn't—"

"No. But I was tempted. Anything looked better than that sweatshop to me. And Dick knew what I was thinking, and that's when he joined the army to lighten the load on me. So I wouldn't be forced into anything . . . bad."

She turned her face away. "But it didn't work out like he planned. And when those officers started picking on him, he wrote me letters that would break your heart and I knew I had to do something, quick. I found out I could buy him out, but it would have taken me a million years to earn the money the way I was going."

"Please don't tell me anything you don't want to."

"Only the truth. . . . Well, I've always liked to sing and dance, it's really what I've always wanted to do. So finally

I got up nerve enough to go see a man who hired girls to do that and. . . . Well, he finally signed me on and sent me west with a traveling show, but he left us broke and stranded here in Denver. So I got a job at the Jamboree. I haven't been there long, I'm not making much yet, but people are beginning to talk about me and I'll do better later. And meanwhile, I like the work. . . ."

"You mean you really like strutting back and forth up there half naked, showing . . . showing yourself to all those dirty-minded men?"

"I don't think they're dirty-minded. I just think they're awful lonesome, most of 'em, and it makes me feel good to cheer 'em up. And it makes me feel good, too, when they holler and clap and whistle, because I know I'm succeeding. Whatever I do, I try to do my best and be the best there is. That's important to me, like being a good soldier's important to you, I guess."

She paused. "Anyhow, main thing's to make you see I'm good for the money without you hirin' Dick to work it out, if you'll just wait. He's still too young to go off with some outfit like that. He still needs a lot of looking after, and he's got to stay here with me."

"I told you, I have no intention of hiring him. And forget the money. Money's not what I'm interested in."

The moment the words were out, he knew that sounded wrong. He saw Jenny stiffen, heard her indrawn breath. Before he could find words to clarify his meaning, she said: "All right. If you want to be paid that way, then—All right."

"Jenny, you—"

She turned away, and the moonlight played over her small figure in a checkered, shifting pattern. "I tell you," she said dully. "After Dick's asleep, we'll go to the Jamboree. I can arrange an upstairs room there, Captain Killraine."

He went to her, took her arm, pulled her around. "Miss Wallace, you misjudge me!" he snapped, not only enraged that she should think such an ugly thing of him so readily, but feeling too as if something strangely important, valuable, had just been whisked from his grasp.

He had begun to admire her greatly, for her courage, her devotion to her brother, and for herself, her looks, her voice. And he had just convinced himself to his own relief that, singer or dancer or whatever, she was not really a fallen woman. Her casual offer had just destroyed that illusion.

"I am not," he heard himself go on, voice bitter, sarcastic, "one of your lonesome miners you doubtless take such satisfaction in cheering up. Thank you for your offer, but I decline. I must make an early start tomorrow. Besides, I'm sure you can do better with your regular customers!"

Jenny Wallace jerked up her head; even in the moonlight he saw how her face paled and her eyes became enormous. She stared, lips moving numbly, wordlessly, for a moment. Then she jerked her arm away. "Regular customers? You think—"

"What else can I think? You just offered—"

She stepped back a pace; now her face contorted. "Yes, I offered. I thought that was what you wanted!"

"Well, it isn't! What kind of man do you take me for?"

"I see." She bit her lip. "It disgusts you, eh? I'm not good enough for you, that it, huh? Anyhow, why should one night with me be worth it, eh, when you can buy any girl in Denver for all night for fifteen dollars!"

"Miss Wallace. I don't think you understand—" He moved toward her, but the fury and the shame on her face halted him, and she threw up one clawed hand. "Don't you touch me!" she rasped. "You understand? You touch me, I'll gouge your eyes out, you high-and-mighty stuffed shirt!"

"Jenny, I—"

"Shut up!" she blared, in her trumpet voice. "Shut your dirty mouth!" She stood there tensely, bosom heaving. "You shut up and listen, and listen good! You couldn't hire me for a night, no man in Denver could hire me for a night! I've slept with one other man in my whole life, and I did that to get this job so I could save my brother! But, you—I owed you so damned much, and I had my pride too, and if that was how you wanted to take your pay-

ment, you were entitled to it and I couldn't turn you down! But you're too damned stupid to know what I was offering you, what it meant! I thought—" She shook her head wildly, the long hair came loose, made a coppery mist around her face. "I thought—Never mind what I thought! Right now, I'll just tell you this! The next time you come to Denver, I'll have your money for you, all of it, and you can think anything you like about the way I got it! But for now—"

"Jenny," Killraine blurted, realizing the dimensions of his mistake. He came toward her. "Jenny!" Suddenly he wanted to seize her, hold her, explain and comfort her. It was important—

Her hand went up, swooped down in an arc, and four talons gouged his face, and he felt sudden pain and blood's warm trickle and jumped back.

"There!" she hissed. "Call that my signature on a promissory note! Jenny Wallace promises to pay—But only in money, you understand? I wouldn't sleep with you now if you were the last man left on earth!" Then a mighty sob racked her whole body and she turned and ran.

Killraine took a step after her. "Jenny!" he heard himself shout desperately.

"Go to hell, Phil Killraine!" her voice drifted back, half stifled with sobs. Then she was out on the street and running, and he could not chase a woman down the street.

Philip Killraine stood there beneath the cottonwoods for a long time, with blood running down his face. Then he said a terse obscenity. After that, sick of Denver, sick of himself, he went directly to the Express Office, claimed his gear from a sleepy clerk, bought a horse from the all-night livery, and pounded out of Denver, seething inwardly, and headed south.

10

Seven big Conestoga wagons drawn by bull teams crawled in a train like a fat, segmented worm across the canyon floor. Not quite thirty tons of trade goods and supplies bound for Rancho Bravo, with Henry Gannon riding on the point.

On the canyon rim, Philip Killraine pulled up the horse he had bought in Pueblo to replace the used-up Denver mount, and savored, for a moment, a sense of homecoming. It would be good to be part of Rancho Bravo once again, to lose himself in the important task of building up the ranch in Big Bend, back with Loosh Calhoon and Elias Whitton and away from towns and cities and, especially, women like Jenny Wallace.

Four hard days of riding, three nights of camping alone beside a shielded fire, and still she haunted him. He kept seeing her nearly naked body strutting back and forth across the stage in the Jamboree; he saw her in the spotless cabin, cooking a meal with complete domestic ease; he saw too her tense body and her face twisted with hatred as she raked his cheek with nails. He heard her two different voices, the deep, husky contralto and the trumpet blare, over and over, in the wind and in his restless dreams. He could not understand why, could not

come to terms with what had happened to him. Endlessly, he tried to convince himself that it was just that he had been too long away from women, and any good-looking girl would have had the same impact on him. But he knew that was not true; the honest, awful truth was that she had made a mark on him deeper than those nail rakes. The hard fact was that he was in love with Jenny Wallace; and what made it even worse was that she was indeed a fallen woman. She had slept with a man to get her job; had offered to sleep with him. She sang and danced half-naked before hundreds of lustful male eyes, and gloried in it. She was loose, disgusting, immoral—and he was wholly enchanted by her.

Sometimes, lying in his blankets in the darkness, he knew how much of a fool he had been not to accept her offer immediately. It was a release that he needed, it would have meant nothing to her, and if he had spent the night with her, perhaps he would have been free of her forever when morning came. It was a special kind of agony that Killraine had known, alone on the prairie, while his hobbled horse cropped grass nearby, and what was needed to wipe it out was work and action; he needed Rancho Bravo.

Now, running his eyes along the length of the wagon train, he frowned. Something was wrong down there, and he could not quite put his finger on what it was. Then he understood, and blessedly, the image of Jenny Wallace temporarily faded from his mind. He found a cut in the canyon wall and put his horse at a crouching skitter down the slope. Gannon spotted him, reined around, rifle coming up. Killraine, to identify himself, let out Gannon's war cry: "Look out for Rancho Bravo!"

He reached the canyon floor, galloped along the line of wagons, and Henry rode to meet him. "Phil!" Gannon thrust out his hand. "You're early! I figured you for tomorrow or the next day." Then he saw the clawmarks on Killraine's cheek, and his mouth twisted. "By damn, you found some action!"

"Never mind that." Killraine looked up and down the

slow-moving train. "Henry, where the hell are all the outriders? There ought to be eight or ten, and I don't see but three! Where are our men?"

Gannon looked embarrassed. "We ain't got no men, except me and those three others—and the bullwhackers."

"Why not?"

"Well," Gannon said, "they wouldn't leave Pueblo. They all caught the gold fever, Phil. What with their bonus, most of them had a damned good stake, and they figured to parley it into big money quick in gold, instead of workin' for wages with cattle. I did everything I could, but Bledsoe, Ryan, and Webb Peters, they was the only ones that would come along."

"I see." Killraine rocked back in his saddle, ran his eyes along the striated, rugged walls of the wide canyon. "Then surely you aren't hauling too much cash-money south. I trust you left most of it in the Pueblo bank."

Gannon's eyes went opaque, his expression defensive. "No. I left just what we agreed on there. Sixty percent of your share, ten each of Loosh's and Elias's. None of mine. All in all, we're carryin' about a hundred thousand."

Killraine was tired, disturbed enough already about Jenny Wallace, and his temper broke before he meant it to. "Goddammit, Henry, that's downright stupid!"

Gannon straightened in the saddle, cheekbones touched with red. "Phil—"

"Well, it is! I told you so in Pueblo! What the hell use for money do we have in Big Bend before we sell our next drive—and that herd's already paid for with the Fort Sumner money! Ten thousand, fifteen, that's the most we ought to have in cash and the rest scattered in good, sound banks, drawing interest!"

Gannon's lips thinned; he found makings, rolled a cigarette, as if to give himself time before he spoke. "Maybe you think there's such a thing as a good, sound bank. I don't."

"The Pueblo bank is sound! So is the Bank of Colorado in Denver! So is Wells-Fargo!"

Gannon snapped a match, lit his smoke. "Today, yeah;

tomorrow, maybe no." Putting out the match carefully, he tossed it aside. "Phil, I've told you before. My old man was rich, and we got wiped out because the Confederate banks went bust. The same thing happened to Loosh Calhoon—"

"It wasn't the banks, it was because you lost a war!"

Gannon's eyes flared, then died. "All right, we lost a war. Be that as it may, I've seen fortunes go down the drain in paper. Me, I want what I make out of Rancho Bravo in hard gold and silver that I can bite my teeth on. And where I can watch it myself." He stroked the rifle cradled on his saddle-bow. "I trust this a lot more than any bank, any piece of paper. So does Loosh. And Elias —he's never had dealings with a bank at all." Gannon paused. "I divided up your share just like you said. But the rest of it—I'll guarantee you Rancho Bravo can look after it better than any bank!"

Killraine swallowed further protest. He could not fault Henry. If anyone were to blame, it was himself for neglecting to organize the proper disposition of the money as he should have, and haring off instead on behalf of a scrawny kid with two left feet.

"Well, what's done is done, and we'll have to make the best of it. Too late to turn back now; we might as well keep on toward Raton Pass. But every human buzzard in Colorado knows what we're carrying by now and that we've got a damned scant crew to defend it with."

"We got fourteen bullwhackers. They're good fighting men."

"I wonder. They hired out to haul freight, not risk their lives for Rancho Bravo's gold. Against Indians, maybe, where it's a question of their own scalps—but do you really think they'll resist if we're hit by bandits?"

Gannon's mouth thinned. "Phil, I'm not a total damned fool. I've promised every one of 'em a whoppin' bonus if we have to fight. They're with us all the way."

"Let's hope so. I've got to have some food and a little rest. Then I'll take a closer look at the situation myself."

"You don't have to take a closer look at anything!" Gannon's temper broke and his voice was harsh. "I'm not

a schoolkid that needs daddy to tell him what to do! And I'm gettin' damned tired of havin' you tell me how I ought to manage! Now, go git yourself some grub and ride in a wagon for a while and leave things to me! If I need you, I'll let you know!"

"Well, that's very kind of you," Phil heard himself say sardonically. "I'm glad you have such confidence in yourself. So—" Seeing Gannon's face darken, he broke off. No, he thought. No. Somehow he mastered his own frayed self-control, knowing he was too tired to think straight now. Keep up with this and it would lead to something serious and ugly, something that might mean the ruin of Rancho Bravo. "Let it go," he said and wheeled his horse. He could feel Gannon's eyes on his back as he rode toward the wagons.

At noon on the next day, Killraine, sprawled on his belly on a ridgecrest, scanned the ground ahead. In the west, the Spanish Peaks gave him bearings; he had virtually memorized a military map based on the explorations of Captain Randolph Marcy, years before. With that in mind, he judged that they were still at least three days out of Trinidad, given the snail's pace of bull-team travel with loaded wagons. And he did not like the look of this country one bit.

Although the road was well-marked with old wheel-ruts, the terrain through which it led was a mugged maze of canyons, cross-canyons, draws and headwaters drainage of half a dozen creeks. Ahead, through his pocket telescope, he could see at least a half dozen places where anyone who wanted them could take them, like picking ripe apples from a tree. And there was no way he could scout them all. Not alone.

But that was the way he had to do it. Last night, he'd sized up the bullwhackers, personally posting them on guard around the circled wagons. They seemed tough enough, and Jackson, the wagonmaster, was staunch in his assertions that they'd fight Old Scratch himself for Gannon's promised bonus. But when, after midnight, he'd made a surprise inspection, he'd found two men off their

posts smoking and talking, and a third asleep. Only grudgingly did they obey his orders to get back where they belonged and keep their eyes open, and when he complained to Jackson, the man looked bored. When you came down to it, Killraine thought, men with brains, spirit and aggressiveness did not hire out to drive oxen all day long for a living.

Be that as it may, they were busy all day with the wagons. That left himself, Gannon, and the three other Rancho Bravo men as armed escort. He and Henry seemed to rub each other wrong every time they met, and it seemed logical for him to ride ahead and make the necessary reconnaisance. But no other Rancho Bravo man could be spared to help him.

So he did the best he could, working his way up every side draw and canyon for two miles ahead of the train, finding the high ground and making careful surveys with his telescope. So far he'd seen nothing to alarm him except the possibilities offered by the terrain itself, and now, folding the telescope, he found himself wondering if Gannon's acid comment of the night before hadn't hit the target after all.

"Phil, you're like an old maid always lookin' under the bed. Besides, if anybody is fool enough to try it, what we'll need's every gun with the wagon. The more guns they see there, the longer'n harder they'll think before they tackle us."

Even so, Killraine could not help it. As a soldier, taking the train through such country without scouting was something he found intolerable. On the other hand, he was accomplishing so little. . . . He decided to return to the wagons, ride with them a while, then move ahead again. Folding the telescope, he edged off the skyline. got to his feet, skittered down the hill to where he'd tied his horse. Mounting, he put it along a deep, twisting draw that would lead him to the wagon road, riding with his rifle across the pommel in front of him, never relaxing his alertness for an instant. The wash made a half-dozen blind turns, and he approached each one warily, though he'd just come this way a half hour before.

It was well he did. Pulling up in the shelter of the third one before rounding it, he caught a sound from down the draw.

It came again, click of shod hoof on rock. Then a horse's snort.

Killraine left the saddle in one quick move, rifle in his hand. In the shelter of the cut bank, he pressed his own mount's muzzle tightly, waited, watching the turn. There were riders coming toward him; at least a pair, he guessed.

Again the sound of metal shoe on rock. His heart pounded; he felt sweat running down his flanks. Any second now—

Then they came around the bend, a pair as he had guessed; white men, in dust-powdered clothes and riding at a walk in single file, rifles ready and the man in front bent slightly from the saddle, following Killraine's trail.

The first man rode past him before he saw the horse; the second came up hard behind. Killraine, from six feet away, said, harshly: "Gentlemen—!" He had them cold.

A single second of surprise; it was enough. The lead man twisted in the saddle, stared, and raised his gun. Killraine fired, point blank, not even putting the Henry to his shoulder. With no way to miss, he was already turning. The second man's Sharps carbine was aimed from the hip. Killraine had already levered in another shell; his second shot came so quickly that its roar blended with the echo of the first one. The man with the Sharps screamed and pitched from the saddle, shirt suddenly turning scarlet. Killraine whirled toward the first one again, then lowered the Henry. The first man's horse had bolted; foot caught in the stirrup, a body trailed, bouncing, twisting, torso almost completely scarlet. Killraine ran toward the second man, but he was dead, his horse stampeded back the way it had come.

It was all so quick that Killraine himself stood there dazed for a full minute after the last shot. Two men trailing him and—His mind grappled with that, then comprehended. Suddenly he cursed, hit the saddle without touching stirrup. But even before his cocked heels raked

his horse with spurs he heard it, a sound like the crackling of dry sticks in a campfire: a pitched battle, many guns, dozens of them, from miles away in the direction of the wagon train.

His horse launched itself in a dead run down the draw; he lashed it frantically with rein ends. But even as he reached the wagon road, pivoted the animal to the north, he knew it was hopeless. Already the gunfire had reached crescendo, was tapering off into a sputtering. Killraine's heart sank as he understood what that meant. *Evelyn!* he thought despairingly. *Henry*—Rage and grief welled up in him as he rode furiously for the wagon train, all caution gone. He'd ridden right through an ambush himself and they'd let him go. Then they'd hit the train! And in overwhelming force, and now, already it was over; already the shooting had stopped. Save for the drumming of his horse's hoofs, the afternoon was silent.

Killraine rode on through the silence, not realizing that he was crying, tears of fury and frustration and grief running down his cheeks as he bent low into the wind.

Then, regardless of his own safety, he swept around a bend and into the mouth of a narrow canyon. Not two hours before, he'd scouted both rims himself as best he could. But his lone best had not been good enough. Because this was where they had caught the Rancho Bravo train.

Roiled dust still hung in clouds over the canyon floor. The Rancho Bravo wagons were strung out in a crazy line, the lead oxen in every team dead or dying in their yokes. The small remuda they'd been driving back to Texas had stampeded.

Then, above the bawling of a wounded ox, Killraine heard the sound: a woman's crying. He galloped on, a perfect target, but he drew no fire; the raiders were long gone. Then he saw her: Irene Gannon.

On her knees, she bent over the body of a man pinned by a dead horse and bathed in scarlet. "Oh, Christ," Philip Killraine said. Then he was off the horse and running to where Henry Gannon sprawled, strangely twisted, arms outflung, left leg pinned beneath the animal's corpse.

Henry's right leg, from waist to boot top, was soaked in scarlet.

"Irene—" Killraine knelt beside her.

She looked up, face smeared with dust and tears and blood. Her eyes, glazed with shock, came alive suddenly with recognition. "Phil!" she whispered. "Help me, oh, hurry, help! I think he's still alive!"

Killraine looked down at the wound in Henry's thigh, still bleeding freely, and even as he raised his head and saw Evelyn and Jackson, the wagon master, running toward him, something in him unclenched. His sister was safe and Gannon's heart still beat and for the moment nothing else made any difference.

"Yes," he said, legs weak. Kneeling, he drew his sheath knife to cut away the bloody chap-leg and ripped off his neckerchief. "Yes, he's still alive." And then he went to work.

"I tell you, we *couldn't* fight!" Jackson roared, pacing up and down. Killraine had pulled the horse off Henry Gannon, had the Rancho Bravo trailboss stretched out on a blanket. The bullet had gone through Henry's thigh and killed his horse; the fall, if not the wound's shock, had knocked Gannon unconscious. In the meantime, he had lost a lot of blood before Killraine had got the wound packed, tied off, bandaged. His left leg, the one that had been pinned, was bruised and swollen, but, fortunately, no bones were broken that Killraine could find.

"Get as much water in him as you can without choking him," Phil told Irene. "He needs lots of liquid to replace that blood. And keep plenty of blankets over him. There's nothing else I can do for him right now."

She looked at him with fear-filled eyes. "Phil—"

"Don't worry," Killraine said, trying to sound as if he meant it. "Henry's tough. He'll be all right." Then he turned to Jackson and Evelyn.

"All right," he said harshly. "Why couldn't you fight?"

"Because it was too damned quick and they had too many men!" Jackson gestured. "There musta been half a dozen sharpshooters up there on each rim! One minute,

everything was quiet, next they opened up! Gannon went down first shot! Then they dropped the bulls to stop the wagons. They knocked off two of your Rancho Bravo men and two of my men before we could even fire a round! What the hell could my men do but run for cover? And then a bunch of 'em come down the canyon, at least a dozen, and your last Rancho Bravo man—Bledsoe, it was—run out there single-handed to meet 'em, shootin' with both handguns, and they just mortally cut him to rags. Surrender? You're goddam right we surrendered! Wasn't nothin' of Rancho Bravo left 'cept your women! For all we knowed, you was dead, too! Anyhow, you was supposed to scout—"

"I know," Killraine said wearily. "But in this country. . . . All right, Jackson. I don't blame you."

"Phil, Mr. Jackson's right," Evelyn said. "And if you blame anyone, blame me. I told them where the gold was. I didn't see how we could fight. I didn't think the money was worth anybody else getting killed. When they wanted to know what wagon it was in, I showed them where it was hidden. . . ."

"That was the smart thing to do," Killraine said.

"And that was all they wanted, the money. Soon as they had it, the shooting stopped and they just rode out again, fast as they could. Four, five minutes; the whole thing couldn't have taken much more."

"A big gang, then," Killraine said. "They sent two men after me and I managed to shoot them both. But that means there must have been two dozen of 'em, maybe thirty. Evelyn, did you recognize any of them?"

His sister shook her head. "There was so much dust, excitement. Besides, they were all masked. Each wore a bandanna over his face and had his hat tied down with another one. All you could see was their eyes." She paused. "But the man that led them. I had a feeling I'd seen him somewhere before."

Killraine's match halted on its way to his cigar. "What did he look like?"

"He was big, that's all I know. Bigger than Henry. But

a lot of them were very big. Only—his eyes. I think they were gray."

Killraine lit the cigar, drew in smoke. Yes, he thought, with sudden certainty. He thumbed a cartridge from the belt that held his Henry rifle's loads. Holding it nose first, he asked, "This color?"

"Yes. Just like lead."

"And did he say anything? Anything at all?"

"Not much. He just pointed a gun at me. Then he said, 'Lady, you want to live, you show me that money.' " She hesitated. "It wasn't a Texas voice, of course. Not any accent I could identify. And I was too frightened to remember anything else he said after that. He just tossed the bags out to the other men and they loaded 'em and rode off."

"And you can't remember anything else he said?"

"Phil, I'm sorry, not a thing. What does it matter? The money's gone, but at least you're safe and Henry's still alive and—"

"He said something else," Jackson cut in. "After they mounted up. He was on this big black geldin' and he hit it with the spurs and then he laughed. 'Come on, boys!' is what he said. 'We got to go! Don't forget! Time is money!' "

"Time is money," Philip Killraine said, and he bit down on his cigar, and now the suspicion was a certainty. "Time is money. Well. So. . . ." Once more he saw Jethro Lawrence looking down at him contemptuously. *I've heard that time is money. . . . You've just cost your outfit eighty-five hundred per minute. . . .*

"Phil—" Irene Gannon called.

He turned.

"Henry's awake, he wants to talk to you."

Killraine whirled, went to kneel beside Henry Gannon.

Henry's face was the color of a fish's belly, freckle blotches beneath cold beads of sweat. But his eyes were clear, lucid, as his pale lips moved. "Phil— Did they get our gold?"

"I—"

"Don't lie," Gannon whispered. "Did they get it?"

"It doesn't matter," Killraine said. "I've still got money in the bank and we've got the herd in Big Bend and another on the way from Texas."

Gannon closed his eyes. "Judas," he said. "I've screwed it all."

"Forget it," Killraine said.

"No. My share don't matter, that was mine to lose. But Elias's and Loosh's and part of yours. . . ." He drew in a long, gasping breath. "You warned me and I wouldn't listen. It went to my head, I reckon. After gittin' the herd to Colorado I thought I was God Almighty. I thought I could do anything."

"Henry, you'd better rest—"

"No. Not 'til I git it said. If I go out, I want it said. You goddam hardheaded little Yankee. You was right all along and I was wrong. You're the best man in the outfit. They don't come no better." He raised a hand. "If there ever is a next time, I'll listen close to you. Phil, I'm sorry."

Killraine took the hand and something that had been frozen in him for a long time thawed, and everything was all right again, money or no money. Once more he was part of Rancho Bravo, and he and Henry Gannon were friends again. He took Henry's hand. "Fair enough," he said. "We're still partners and Rancho Bravo is still Rancho Bravo. Now, get some rest."

"Guess I will," Gannon said, and he closed his eyes. But he was smiling slightly now.

Killraine stood up. "Phil, is he all right?" asked Irene anxiously.

Killraine grinned. "Don't worry about him," he said, and now there was conviction in his voice. "Henry Gannon's too tough to kill." Then, because he wanted no one to see his face, he walked away, behind a wagon.

He was still standing there when Evelyn, after a considerate interval, appeared. "Phil, what happens now?"

He took the butt of his cigar from his mouth, looked at her and smiled. His plans were made. "Sis, I'm sorry. I guess there'll be a delay in your reunion with Loosh. We'll have to wait here a day or two to give Henry time

to get back strength. Then we'll move on to Trinidad and the train will lay over there. A couple of weeks, I guess, while Henry heals. That ought to give me time enough."

"Time enough for what?"

"Why," Killraine said, "once you're all safely in Trinidad, I'm going back to Pueblo. There should still be Rancho Bravo men there, and maybe I can get help from Wolfe and their vigilance committee. Anyhow, I'm going to try." He fished for a fresh cigar. "I've got a fair idea who took our money. And I'm not going to let him get away with it. I'm going to do my best to make him curse the day he ever heard the name of Rancho Bravo, much less robbed it."

Parsons, agent for Wells-Fargo, was also president of the Pueblo, Colorado Territory vigilance committee. In the hall above the general store, he sat behind a table flanked on either side by three men, among whom were Marshal Wolfe and Laird Conroy, the cattle buyer. Philip Killraine, facing them, let his eyes range over the seven. As always when excited, he bounced up and down on his feet, as if his body held more energy than it could cope with. "Gentlemen," he said, "I think that is a lousy answer."

Parsons shrugged. "I'm sorry, Captain Killraine. It's the only one we can give."

Phil stroked his mustachios. "You understand, of course, that this could drastically affect our plans for marketing our beef here."

"I understand," said Parsons, and then Laird Conroy cut in.

"Phil, we all want to keep the goodwill of Rancho Bravo. But look at it our way. If you'd left the money here in Pueblo, it'd have been safe, we'd have taken responsibility for it. But when you decided to haul it back to Texas, our responsibility ended. Now you've been robbed, but not here in Pueblo; a lot closer to Trinidad than here."

He stood up. "Now, let's be honest with one another; we are both businessmen. If you bring another herd, it's to your advantage to sell it here. If you don't bring another one, other people will. You've shown the way, and you won't have any monopoly next year; by fall Colorado will be full of Texas cattle. We won't be dependent on Rancho Bravo."

"Don't count on that!" Killraine snapped. "I assure you, we intend to dominate the cattle business in this territory for years to come."

"Well, we'll see," Conroy said. "Nevertheless—"

Wolfe now arose. "Captain," he said with quiet authority, "it just all boils down to this. First, you don't have any proof that Jethro Lawrence robbed you. I'm not saying it's unlikely, but this committee has to have some proof before it moves. Second, even if you had ironclad proof, its outside this committee's jurisdiction. And third, you've been told before. Raven's Camp is like a fort, and the Lawrences run Raven's Camp and there's a mess of them up there. It would take a hundred men to storm it from down here, and maybe half of them would die. Even if we said yes, we couldn't get the committee to risk their lives on your behalf, they'd flat-out balk, and once you've seen that place, you wouldn't blame 'em." He spread his hands. "There you are. I'm sorry, but there's no way

around it. You got to kill your own snakes. Now, my advice is wait 'til next year and bring in Texas men, or, if you're in a hurry, take the money you got left here and go hire some gunmen. There's plenty around. Hire your own army and take on the Lawrences."

Killraine looked at him and read the finality on his face and knew further argument was useless. Nor was there any point in blaming Wolfe or Conroy. They had used their influence to arrange this meeting, had given him his chance to present his case, and he had failed. As Wolfe had said, now it was up to him.

"Before I hire any army," he answered, "I'll make do with the Rancho Bravo men still in town. If I can find a half dozen, they'll be worth an army."

Wolfe shook his head. "There ain't any Rancho Bravo men still in town."

As Killraine's face registered his disbelief, he went on. "I keep track of everybody comes and goes. Your Texas men are scattered to the four winds. Denver, maybe, or in the hills trying to make a strike, or broke and drifting south with their tails between their legs. I don't know. But there ain't a single one left here."

"You sure?" Killraine's heart sank.

"I know my town," Wolfe said flatly.

So, Killraine thought. There went virtually the last hope. "Well, gentlemen," he said, admitting defeat, "thank you for your consideration and your time. Good day." And he went out and down the stairs.

Descending them, he was almost awed by the anger and determination in himself. He had, in the past few days, discovered a whole new side of Philip Killraine, one with the capacity to hate and the desire to kill. Warfare had been his trade for years, but this cold determination to find an enemy and exterminate him like a cockroach was something new.

Gannon, wasted and pale but out of danger, had sensed that in him in Trinidad and he had tried to persuade Phil not to go to Pueblo or after Lawrence.

"Not alone, goddammit," he'd insisted. "Let's head on

south. Then Loosh and Elias can have a hand in it, and we can bring men up from Big Bend or from east, somewhere. It'll take time, but—"

"No," Killraine had said. "I'll not wait. They'd all haunt me if I did—Bledsoe, Ryan, Peters."

Gannon closed his eyes. "I'm the one they'll haunt."

"No. I'll settle the score for them. After all, the money's my responsibility."

"Phil, it ain't worth it."

Killraine had looked down at him. "The herd was your responsibility. You didn't say that about the herd."

"No." Gannon looked away.

"Besides," Killraine went on, "it's important that these people—all of them—get one thing straight. Nobody does what they did to Rancho Bravo and gets away with it. Retribution has to be sure and swift. Otherwise next year we'll be nothing but a joke up here."

Gannon's eyes turned back to him. After a minute he said, "There's no way I could stop you anyhow."

"None," Killraine said.

Henry put out his hand. "Then good luck, you hardheaded damn yank." As Phil shook it, he leaned back. "Lord God," he said. "I almost feel sorry for the Lawrences."

Out on the street, Killraine halted. Right now, those brave words sounded only brassy and idiotic. He had counted on help from the Pueblo committee; he would not get that now. And he had counted, too, on finding at least a few Rancho Bravo men to side him. If Wolfe were right, he could scratch that prospect.

Well, he would take no one's word for anything; he'd see for himself. Lighting a fresh cigar, he began his circuit of the town.

Two hours later, drinking coffee in the hotel dining room, he had proved to himself that Wolfe knew his town. There was not a single Rancho Bravo man left here; no one could tell him where they'd gone. They'd simply scattered like dust in a high wind.

Moreover, he'd appraised the gunmen Wolfe had men-

tioned. There were plenty of them: mostly veterans who had lived by using weapons for so long that they knew no other way, now, than to keep on fighting for whatever wages anyone would pay them. He still had enough of his own share in the bank to hire a company of them if it came to that, but he knew it would be a waste of money. Mercenaries were not to be trusted. They would go only so far and then hang back. Indeed, if he managed to recover the Rancho Bravo money, most of the ones he'd seen would be capable of turning on him and taking it for themselves. No. Maybe the only solution was to wait until next spring and then bring a Texas army. . . .

"Captain Killraine! Jeez!"

Killraine set down the cup so hard it splashed, and looked up into the lean, pimply face of Dick Wallace. Dammit, he thought in surprise and anger, did the kid intend to haunt him forever? "What the hell are you doing here?" he flared. "I thought you were in Denver with your sister!" He had a quick, vivid image of Jenny in the moonlight and tried to stifle it.

Wallace pulled out a chair, sat down, looked at Killraine, eyes strangely sad and roiled with worry. "Jenny ain't in Denver any longer," he said. "The Lawrences made her a offer to entertain up in Raven's Camp, and she's gone there with Bud."

Philip Killraine had the sensation then that the earth itself shifted under him, and then that everything stopped, each figure in the dining room frozen, Wallace's face like a flat, pasted poster. "Gone to Raven's Camp? With *who?*"

"Bud Lawrence."

"So," Killraine said, slumping in his chair.

"I don't know." Dick shook his head. "I tried to stop her, but I couldn't. I mean, she's like a different person, now. All of a sudden she don't seem to give a damn for anything. Lawrence has been after her for a long time, she said. Been tryin' to get her to work in a place they got up yonder. And this time, when he offered her a lot of money, she took him up on it." He fished in his pocket,

brought out a small buckskin bag, and coins in it chinked as he set it on the table. "Anyhow, there's the rest of your money outa what Bud advanced her. She gave it to me and told me to go and find you and be damned sure you got paid in full. I was ridin' south and stopped over and I seen that horse with the Rancho Bravo brand outside." He leaned forward, pleading. "Cap'n, please, you got to hire me on. I can't find nothin' in Pueblo and I don't want to go to Raven's Camp."

"No," Killraine said.

"Please, I—There ain't nothin' I want more than to work for Rancho Bravo! I'll do anything; drive a wagon, help the cook, just anything. . . . And I already told you, I can shoot really good!"

Killraine looked at that lean, blotchy face, and suddenly the very sight of it made him physically sick. Or was it the thought of Jenny and Bud Lawrence, of that piquant, lively girl and that gross brute with his blob of nose and lead-colored eyes and shambling walk? Well, water sought its own level. . . . He shoved back his chair. "Now listen here, Wallace, I said no and I meant it! I'm telling you, and you'd better get it through your head—there's no place on Rancho Bravo! And furthermore, I've had all of you Wallaces I want! If you keep following me around, I'm going to do something about it, and what I do won't be pleasant. You understand? From now on, you stay out of my way! Leave me alone! I don't have the time to mess with you any longer!"

Dick rocked back as if Killraine had struck him, and his face paled. Before he could speak, Phil was on his feet, throwing a coin on the table. Then he turned, stalked out, leaving Wallace staring at the buckskin sack of money.

Seething, he walked the street. So Jethro had the Rancho Bravo money and Bud had Jenny Wallace and the Lawrences must feel they were riding high. And he was alone and helpless and—No, by God! he thought. I will not! I will not ride back to Texas with my tail between my legs, leaving them—and her—to laugh at me!

And suddenly his decision was made.

He went to Wolfe's office and found the Marshal behind his desk. Killraine dropped fifty dollars' worth of coins in front of Wolfe. "I'm riding up to Raven's Camp," he said. "If I'm not back in two weeks, use that to hire a man to go to Trinidad and deliver this message to Henry Gannon: There's nothing he can do for me. Go on south. Come back next year and kill them all."

"Killraine—" Wolfe half arose.

"Will you do it?"

"Yeah, but—Man, you can't go in there by yourself! You won't have a whore's chance!"

"That," said Killraine, "is something we shall see. So long, Wolfe, and thanks for everything." Then he went out, to buy a pack horse and supplies. He was emerging from the general store when he saw Dick Wallace ride by on a scrawny nag, headed north towards Denver. Awkward in the saddle, even at a walk, the slumping boy was the picture of dejection.

Killraine spat, stifling a thrust of pity. He had other things to worry about besides a slum brat and his dissolute sister. This was a hard land, and it was up to them to make their own way in it—or perish. They were no longer any concern of his.

Camping that night in a steep valley near the Arkansas River, he was less sure of that. Crouched over a tiny fire of the kind Elias Whitton had taught him to make, with a blanket draped around his shoulders to trap heat behind his back, he had, staring into the flames, a quick, wrenching vision of Jenny Wallace's saucy body, half-naked, strutting on the stage. That gave way, somehow, to her face as it had been in darkness when they walked beneath the cottonwoods, and a reaction that was more than merely physical stirred in him. In a way, he thought, it was a terrible waste. Bad enough for a girl of her beauty and presence to be forced into such a life in the first place; worse for her to end up mixed up with people like the Lawrences. It made him feel sad even though, of course, money was all such women cared for. No reason to blame himself. Surely, even if he had never existed, she

would have gone off with someone like Lawrence anyhow, once it was made worth her while. Why then, did he feel this regret, this gnawing guilt?

That night with her beneath the cottonwoods would not leave his memory. In that brief interval, there had been something between them. Was it possible she had felt it, too, and the offer she had made him was an attempt to prolong it, deepen it, capture it before it vanished? After all, what else had she to offer him? He did not like at all the view of himself that slant of thinking conjured up: an insensitive and callous fool, rejecting the most important thing she had to give, maybe destroying what little self-respect she'd managed to build and cling to. Was that how she saw him? No wonder, then, that she had turned to Lawrence, who, at least, was not a hypocrite or a sanctimonious prig. . . .

In the mountains a panther screamed, a she in heat or a male on the scent of one. Like the cry of a woman suffering terribly, it lasted for seconds and echoed for seconds longer through the night, and Killraine shivered and pulled the blanket tighter around his shoulders. Then he shook his head.

He must forget her, purge her from his mind. What he had to think about now was Raven's Camp and Rancho Bravo's money, and he had no time nor leeway for anything else.

Wolfe had said he was courting death, and likely that was true. Still, there was no other option, and you learned this in the cavalry: boldness and surprise could often save what seemed to be a hopeless situation. Whatever Lawrence was expecting in the way of repercussions, it would not be Philip Killraine riding into Raven's Camp alone. That would make him wonder. Besides, he had the money, he had no reason to assume he'd been identified, he would think he had the whip hand. Possibly, just possibly, if he played his own cards close to his chest, he could get away with it. He might not get the money back, but at the very least he would make a personal reconnaissance of that stronghold everyone seemed to fear so much and the force that manned it. And if he got out alive, then

he could decide what his next move would be; when he would attack and how and with what kind of army at his back.

All he knew for now was that he was drawn to Raven's Camp like iron to a magnet. He could not help himself; he had to go there, win, lose, or draw; live or die. And there was no point in thinking more about it.

Finally he rolled up in his blankets and managed to go to sleep. Just before dawn he awakened from a dream of Jenny Wallace, one so tender and erotic that he was shaken. There was no chance of more sleep; he loaded up his outfit on the pack horse and journeyed on up the Arkansas.

Once deep into the mountains, he was awed. The river divided the great ranges; giant peaks towered over him, lower slopes clad with golden-foliaged, quaking aspens, higher flanks dark with spruce; then, above the timberline, raw rock and veins and caps of snow. The air was thin and cold and had a taste of its own; springs, runs, and creeks surged down every seam and valley to the Arkansas. He caught glimpses of dark gorges; crossed great mountain meadows, fine land for grazing. Mostly, though, he stuck to the toll road along the Arkansas, built by the founders of Canon City to connect it with the lowlands outside.

On this he fell in with some miners, and, on the pretext of being a speculator looking for investment action wangled information about Raven's Camp. "Man, don't waste your time there," one said. "You want a square shake, try Fair Play or Tarryall. But even if you make a nickel in that place, Jethro won't let you keep it." He drew a map in the dirt with a stick. "But here it is, if you're determined. Head north from Canon City a smart day's ride on a good horse. Then turn off west here, along this river they call Raven's Fork. That's a kind of road—one wagon wide—and enough to give a billy goat the hiccups. A day's ride, if you watch your step, will see you over this pass here and down into this valley. That's the town." He drew a circle, then four straight lines radiating from its

upper half. "These are the real diggings—four gulches up behind it; that's where the color and most of the claims are. But you might as well know now; nothin' goes into those diggin's the Lawrences don't git their share of, and not a wagon load of ore passes out that don't go through their stamp mill first so they can skim the high grade. Even if you buy a claim up there, you can't keep half of what you take outa it."

"That's outrageous!" Killraine said. "And you mean the people up there stand for it?"

The miner—Templeton was his name—smiled wryly. "They ain't got much choice. Ever' time somebody stands up on his hind legs and complains, Jethro calls his vigilance committee together. They got a big tree down there by the crick, and he keeps it decorated pretty regularly. What I'm sayin' is, them Lawrences ain't only a family, they're an army. You fight one, you got to fight 'em all, and there must be more'n fifty of 'em. You just don't buck them kind of odds, especially after you seen everybody's tried it hauled up before Jethro's committee, tried and hanged, all in the same half hour. Oh, there's honest folks in Raven's Camp, up in the gulches. But their nerve's long since been killed. Half of what you dig, with Jethro takin' the other half, is better'n nothing—and a heap better than a claim six by three and all of its dirt piled on top of you." He sobered. "I mean a grave."

"Then I'll surely stay away from Raven's Camp," Killraine lied.

He skirted Canon City at the mouth of the magnificent Royal Gorge of the Arkansas, with its half-mile-high walls and foaming current, and hit the road leading north to South Park and Fair Play. As Templeton had said, a day's ride brought him to where the road divided, its western segment disappearing into a gorge through which rushed a narrow stream foaming as if with perpetual rage. Killraine did not take it at once, but only sized it up as he rode on past. What he saw of it was sobering.

It was almost like a tunnel—or the entrance to a trap. Climbing steeply, the road—hardly more than a ledge gouged from living rock—disappeared from view behind

a blind turn. On its right side rose a high, sheer cliff; another one just as sheer dropped away to the stream on the left. In places the far wall of the gorge leaned across the stream and almost touched the near one, shutting off the sunlight. Tendrils of mist curling over the spuming creek added another touch of eeriness, making it seem all the more forbidding. A half mile further on, Killraine pulled into concealment in some spruce, lit a cigar, considered.

Abandon Hope All Ye Who Enter Here, he thought. Once he was in that gorge, around the bend, he was committed. He could be sealed off like a rat in a run at any time. For a moment his courage, his resolve, almost failed. Then he thought of Henry Gannon, Loosh Calhoon, Elias Whitton, all depending on him. And of all the good men who had died only to line Lawrence's pockets with gold. And somehow, though he did not want to, he thought of Jenny Wallace. Up there now, and probably all hope abandoned too. Whatever her dreams, ideals, aspirations, it would not take long for the Lawrences to crush them. No matter how much courage she had, they'd soon break her. She was, when you came down to it, really only a child herself, with no idea of what she had gotten into by going there with Bud.

But of course, that was not his affair. It was his own money and his own revenge that he was after. Carefully he put out the cigar. Then he turned back down the trail, and, rifle unsheathed and across his saddle, entered the gorge of the Raven's Fork.

Before he had traveled half a mile, he knew why no other district's vigilance committee would tackle Raven's Camp. Ten marksmen on the rims of this gorge could wipe out a whole brigade and never take a casualty. It was, as everyone had said, a natural fortress.

More than that, it was a brutal climb. Up and around the road twisted, built to a merciless grade. Killraine's ears popped, opening and closing as he gained altitude. His horses labored and needed resting nearly every mile; like him, they were creatures of the lowlands and unaccustomed to the thinness of the air. If, he thought, he had

been foolish enough to lead some sort of mass attack on this place without reconnoitering first, the result would certainly have been a massacre. It was just as well he'd come alone.

Making what progress he could, he always watched the rims, though if they wanted him, they could take him with a single shot. Then in late afternoon, a new sound intruded above the continual rushing of the stream to which he'd become accustomed. Phil, reining in his horse, cocked his head, wondering if the altitude had ruined his ears or if the thin air were making the blood pound in his temples with extraordinary force. *Whomp, whomp, whomp!* A steady, titanic pounding, with a rhythm like the very heart of the mountains themselves hammering away. As it went on without ceasing, he frowned; and then he understood. This must be the sound of Jethro Lawrence's stamp mill crushing ore. He was nearing Raven's Camp.

More cautiously he rode on, expecting a challenge at any moment, knowing that surely he must be watched. But none came, and he supposed one rider with a lightly burdened pack horse would be allowed to go in without question. Of course, anything resembling a posse would be a different matter. So, likely, would getting out again.

Then the pass topped out. Killraine crossed it and saw the town below.

It lay in a bowl-shaped valley, a scabrous collection of buildings of unpainted boards, peeled logs, or stone, divided by the stream which ran through its center, with streets scooped out on either bank; and for a place so remote, it was surprisingly large. Above it, like a dirty blanket, hung a dark cloud of smoke, belched from a pair of stacks protruding from the roof of a long, high building on its farther outskirts; and it was from this that the steady pounding noise came. Smaller structures were huddled around the large one like chicks around a hen, and Killraine saw parked, high-sided ore wagons, smaller carts, stacks of firewood, and knew this was the stamp mill. To fuel its boilers, the valley walls had been stripped of timber and left raw, naked, ugly. Beyond the mill where the valley narrowed, smaller roads and trails fanned out, disappearing into a forbidding jumble of hills and ridges; those, he knew, must lead to the separate, more remote gulches where the diggings were. From this height it was like looking at a map, and Killraine memorized the features of the terrain before he put his horse in motion down the steep, winding road.

Into the lion's mouth, he thought as the pounding of the mill grew ever louder. But no one challenged him, and

presently he came down off the slope onto the level by the stream. Then, where the road divided, one fork leading over a solid, wooden bridge, he halted once more.

The tree stood hard by the bridge, what had once been an enormous aspen long since killed by lightning, its trunk a jagged, shattered column forty feet in height, a single big limb three or four yards long jutting straight out fifteen feet above the ground. Barkless, bleached by weather to the color of a bone, that tree was something to catch the eye. So, too, were the four twists of old rope dangling from the limb.

Killraine felt a touch of chill that did not come from the twilight mist above the creek. He knew what must once have dangled from those ropes.

Thoughtfully he lit a cigar; then he rode on into town.

Its business section was on the stream's north bank and with evening coming on it was a place of unexpected bustle. Nearly every other building was a bar or gambling hall, and men streamed in and out of them like ants. Here and there groups of loafers lounged on porches or around a watering trough. Most seemed to be ordinary miners, in earth-caked clothes; he noticed that they were unarmed. But their numbers were salted with a sprinkling of another breed, tall, rawboned men standing out in the crowd like so many wolves in a flock of sheep. The family resemblance was unmistakeable; these, Killraine knew, were Lawrences, Jethro's nephews, cousins, maybe brothers. And all of them wore guns, most a pair.

Phil saw how men made way for them when they approached, watched a bunch of loafers grow quiet, dissolve, when one sauntered up. Like guards among a bunch of convicts, he thought. You could almost smell the fear and resentment their presence generated. Not much, probably, went on in Raven's Camp that Lawrence's family vigilance committee didn't know about almost at once.

He drew attention from them, too: the short, muscular man in travel-stained Texas clothes and the blue cavalry hat riding down the street with led horse and his rifle

across his saddle. Perversely, as one stepped into the street Killraine halted, blocking his way. "Pardon me, but could you tell me where to find Mr. Jethro Lawrence?"

Without recognition, lead-colored eyes raked over him suspiciously. Grudgingly, "He'll be in his office. Down yonder by the stamp mill."

"Obliged." Killraine tipped his hat, rode on.

By the time he reached the mill, its pounding and the hissing of its steam apparatus was nearly deafening. He skirted a pile of spoil that reeked of chemicals, turned his nervous horses toward a smaller building of solid stone, one end set into the slanting hillside. LAWRENCE & SONS —PLANT OFFICE. A black gelding and three other horses were at the hitchracks. Killraine dismounted, tied his own two animals securely.

Making sure his holster flap was turned back, the rifle in his arm's crook, he went to the door of thick wooden planks strapped with steel. Before his hand touched its handle, it swung open on heavy, squeaking hinges, and Jethro Lawrence was there, towering over him.

"Well," Lawrence roared, grinning broadly, booming voice carrying easily above the thunder of the mill. "Mister Killraine! Welcome to Raven's Camp! We been expectin' you! Come in the house, sir!" And he stepped aside, gesturing for Killraine to enter. Behind him, his three youngest sons were ranged around the room, looking at Killraine with cold bullet-eyes, their hands dangling near their guns.

Philip Killraine sucked in a deep breath and crossed the threshhold. When Lawrence closed the heavy door, the stamp mill's pounding faded out.

Lawrence was still smiling. "You recollect my youngest boys: Rance, Jimmy, Sonny. Boys, you remember Mr. Killraine with Rancho Bravo. Say howdy to him."

The three sons mumbled something, not relaxing their alertness. "Like I said," Lawrence continued, "we was expecting you. Looks like you come loaded for bear. Don't blame you at all, this is shore rough country up here. But you're among honest folks now, and we'll see to

you. Maybe you'd like—" his voice was edged "—to put your rifle here in the rack. Kinda awkward to carry 'round."

Killraine hesitated, then nodded. As long as they didn't try to take his Colt. . . . He put the Henry in a gun rack on the wall that held a lot of other rifles. "Expecting me?" he said, turning.

"Have been for quite a while. Never figured you'd throw good money down the flume dealing with Conroy after you had time to reconsider. Wouldn't make sense to a businessman like you. So . . . even if you didn't meet *my* deadline in Denver, I expect we can still do business."

Killraine looked up into that smiling, mocking, craggy face. "And of course," Lawrence continued, "you were recognized when you crossed the pass. Long before you reached it, for that matter. They brought me word and I gave orders not to bother you. Figured you were coming straight to me to deal and I sure didn't want to irritate you." He gestured toward another door. "My private office. Why don't we go in and strike a blow for liberty?"

Cat and mouse, Killraine thought. Well, there was nothing for it but to play it out. "I'd be glad to join you," he said coolly.

He thought a flicker of admiration crossed Jethro's face. "Good. Boys, you jest hang around out here. If I want you, I'll let you know. This way, Mr. Killraine."

Phil trailed him warily into a smaller room containing a roll-top desk, two chairs, no windows at all, a hurricane lamp dangling from the ceiling. In the back wall was another door, set into stone. Made entirely of steel plates riveted together, it was like the entrance to a vault.

Lawrence motioned Killraine to a chair, sat down behind the desk, opened its roll top, took out a bottle and two glasses. "You'll find this fair whiskey. If there's one thing us mountain folks from West Virginny pure despise, it's bar rotgut. We always made our own back there, but there ain't no corn to be had out here, so we have good bourbon hauled in to us." Handing Phil a glass, he went on, "I'm sure proud you came here yourself to see how us folks live. There's plenty that badmouth us, but we work

hard for what we git. Pore but proud, that's us Lawrences." Then settling back, he raised his glass. "Your health, sir, and to your friends and business associates in your cattle business. I trust they're all well." And he drank.

So did Phil, and the whiskey was indeed excellent.

"Yes, sir," Lawrence went on. "Pore but proud. Course I got to admit, we ain't done so bad since we come to Colorado. This is truly a land of opportunity, Mr. Killraine. From the fust moment I sized it up, I knowed this was where my fambly ought to settle. And I'm pleased to say they all come out and are all doin' well." His eyes met Phil's, glanced off. "Yes, sir, there's a good sixty Lawrence men right here in Raven's Camp, and their famblies. Sixty good mountain men. . . ." His voice trailed off significantly, letting Killraine digest that fact.

"But I'm talkin' too dang much," he went on. "Let's get down to business about your cattle."

Killraine said, "There are no cattle. The deal with Conroy went through all right, and he's taken title to the herd. But after we collected from him, we had bad luck. Robbers hit our wagon train north of Raton Pass and cleaned us out of a hundred thousand in gold specie."

Lawrence sat up straight, looking shocked. "Is that a fact? Now, that's a pure shame. What's this territory comin' to? Mr. Killraine, I'm sorry. Do you—" his eyes met Killraine's "—know who did it?"

"I've got a fair idea," said Killraine. Lawrence, he sensed, was thrown off balance. The last thing he'd expected was a lone Rancho Bravo man riding into Raven's Camp; his devious mind was already trying to figure out the trick behind Killraine's presence. And Lawrence, Killraine guessed, had to be convinced there was a trick; some secret, hidden threat. He would not be content until he felt satisfied that he knew what it was. Until then, he'd play his cards close to his vest.

For that matter, Phil thought, so would he. After what he'd seen here, he knew there was nothing he could do alone. He'd made his reconnaisance; next spring, when he

had a Texas army—But first he had to get out of Raven's Camp. Now, he thought, it was as if he and Lawrence were playing poker—with lives and wealth as stakes.

"You have a fair idea," Lawrence repeated. "And what's your fair idea, Mr. Killraine?"

" 'Time,' " Killraine said, " 'is money.' "

He saw Lawrence's eyes change. "Are you saying it was us?"

"Yes," Killraine answered. He drained his glass, set it down. "And I want the money back, Jethro."

Lawrence looked at him with eyes like chips of granite. "Well now," he said slowly. "Aren't you the cockerel. You got some proof, I reckon?"

"Enough for us," Killraine said. "That's why I came here. You've got the chance to return the money—Or you can take the consequences."

"Consequences." Lawrence's laugh was a short, hoarse bark.

"Gannon's still alive," said Killraine. "I've got two other partners in Big Bend, plenty of Texas cowboys and more on the way with another herd. And money left to hire an army, if it comes to that. Either you return our money, Lawrence, one hundred and four thousand dollars in gold specie, or you take those consequences. We'll come in here and hang you and all your family."

"Well now," said Lawrence. "This takes me by surprise, but it's straight enough talk. You're threatening to wipe me out, Killraine?"

"No. Promising."

Lawrence laughed again. Then he stood up. "I like you, Killraine. You're a feisty little feller. A man gits so goddam tired of the stupid kind. The ones that roll over and play dead first time anybody frowns at 'em. No imagination, no drive, no nothin'. Just animals, waitin' for somebody to lead 'em by the nose. You know, of course, that just for badmouthin' me like that, I could have you squashed like an ant.'

"And you know," Killraine said, "that if I don't return to Big Bend, they will certainly come against you. And see you hanged."

"Well, I ain't so sure of that," said Lawrence. "But I ain't goin' to squash you, Killraine. Come here."

Phil arose as Lawrence took a key ring from his belt and went to the iron door in the back wall. Lawrence opened it with two separate keys; when it swung wide, Killraine gasped.

The vault was carved out of solid rock, lined with shelves. Killraine saw canvas bag after canvas bag on them and sheaves of greenbacks, and a few bars of gold bullion on the floor.

"This ain't the only one," Lawrence said. "There's another for high grade that's somewhat bigger. But the specie's in here." He gestured. "All right, Killraine. You look through the whole mess. Anything you can positively identify as Rancho Bravo money, you take it with you."

Killraine said, "We don't put our brand on every gold piece."

"Well, you should of," Lawrence answered. Suddenly he backed away, slammed the door and locked it and then faced Phil, and his face was like the rock itself.

"All right, you little gamecock. You talk about your Rancho Bravo and your men and money. Well now, you just seen part of our money. And only part. And I already told you, sixty good fightin' men that take my orders. Now, come along; I'm gonna show you somethin' else. Gonna show you a lot of things." His lips curled in a grin. "And don't look so scared. I ain't gonna harm you. Mind your manners, you're as safe here in Raven's Camp as in a church."

He stood up. Killraine looked at him warily, then also arose. "Lead the way," he said.

The stamp mill was like a foretaste of hell.

A hundred yards long, half that wide, it was open at both ends part way up the sides. Along one wall were six giant steel hammers rising and falling on enormous cams, their huge heads slamming down on the ore tables, the dies, Lawrence called them, with sufficient force to crush a boulder like an apple. Along the other wall was a com-

plex of machinery, the gears and belting that drove the huge hammers, the steam engines and their great riveted steel boilers that supplied the tremendous quantities of power needed. Teams of men fed wood into the boiler furnaces from outside; within, mechanics stripped to the waist and sweating from the terrible heat the boilers generated tended the machinery.

Straining mules hauled ore carts down a center track, nearly naked men, bodies gleaming in the light of bracketed torches now that dusk had settled, dumped ore on the tables beneath the pounding hammers, then reloaded the pulverized rock, moved it on. The noise, the roaring of machinery, the slamming of the hammers, was worse than an artillery barrage, Phil thought, and quailed at the idea of humans working in it all day long.

The heat was almost as bad; the drifting rock-dust, floating everywhere, heightened the resemblance to purgatory, clogging nostrils, rasping throats. And, like Satan's demons, there were, Killraine saw, armed guards everywhere, inside the mill and out.

Lawrence, however, seemed to notice neither dust nor heat nor noise, and his voice carried easily above the turmoil. "Watch th' hammers! Ever' now and then a man gits caught under one! It don't leave much!" He grinned, gestured. "That's why we use Mex'cans! They come cheap, they work hard, and if one gits squashed, nobody misses him!"

Killraine stared at the huge hammer heads pounding down, thought of a man caught beneath one, and his stomach knotted. He edged well away, watching Lawrence warily, and saw the big man grin. "Let's move along!" Lawrence bellowed.

Killraine gratefully sucked in fresh air when they were in the open again. Lawrence pointed to a complex of sheds adjoining the mill, led Killraine through them. Here the pulverized ore was fed into a series of rocker troughs with riffles in their bottoms; gushing water from a flume carried off lighter rock-dust while heavy metals sank to the bottom. It was a complicated operation based on a

simple theory. Armed men were even more numerous here, watching Mexicans who worked the rockers and cleaned the riffles.

Nearby, there was a somewhat smaller building from which came the reek of chemicals. Lawrence bypassed it. "That's th' amalgamation buildin'. Free gold—that's gold in quartz—we handle in the washin' sheds. Refractory—that's ore with all kinds of minerals in it, copper and the like—you got to work with chemicals. We can't git enough chemicals to do mucha that yet, but we'll be into it with both feet soon."

He pointed across the creek. "Yonder's the bunkhouses for the Mes'cans. But fore they leave the mill, they gotta stand inspection. Bastards'll try to hide a nugget or a piece of high grade on you ever' time. So we make 'em strip an' give 'em a good goin' over. And if we find anything on one, he's finished."

"Fired?" yelled Killraine, catching a certain significance in his voice.

Lawrence grinned. "Not exactly!" he yelled back, then turned. "Come on."

They moved away from the mill, and Killraine was grateful for the diminishment of noise with distance. "Yonder," Lawrence said, pointing to a cluster of stone houses on the hillside above them, "is where we live. Me, my boys, most of the whole fambly. You'll notice that place has got a field of fire commands the mill and this end of the valley."

The compound of houses was indeed almost like a fort. Then Lawrence gestured to the skylines on both sides of the valley. "I won't tell you where they are, but there's look-out points up yonder, always manned. They control the roads from the gulches and any other place anybody could take us from the flank. And you seen the pass. That's always guarded, and nobody's gonna git through there."

Killraine looked at him. "You're afraid, aren't you? Scared as hell."

Lawrence's eyes turned hard. "No. I'm jest no fool, like

at least one Texas outfit I can name. Let's go back to the office."

Killraine went with him, noticing that Lawrence never let him get behind him. Nor did Phil let Lawrence drop behind himself; they marched side by side in a touchy, tense precision. When Lawrence was behind his desk again, the three sons still in the outer room, he poured two more drinks.

Gulping half of his, he set down his glass, leaned forward, and now all spurious good humor was gone from his face. "All right, Killraine, you've seen it. I want you to see more of it. You got until noon tomorrow to look at anything you want to look at and nobody's gonna bother you. But by noon you top out the pass and head back to the flatlands, you understand?"

"No," Phil said. "I don't."

"Well, then, I'll make it simple." Lawrence stood up, towering over him. Killraine could feel the force, the power, emanating from the man; he had served under generals less intelligent and impressive.

"All right," Lawrence said. "You think we're the ones that robbed you. What you think don't cut no ice with me. Anyhow, you come here to look us over and see if you could come against us. Well now, you've done seen and you'll see more, and what it all adds up to is, you nor anybody else ain't got a whore's chance."

He paced back and forth, that rawboned, gray-maned giant, then halted, turned. "You seen the stamp mill. I took it from an Eastern syndicate that brought it in before the war. The minute I laid eyes on it, I knowed that was the key to what I've wanted all my life."

He paused. "It's a poor existence we useta lead up in them Virginny mountains, Killraine. A gentleman like you's got no idea how poor it was. Tryin' to scrape out a livin' on them hillsides, a patch of corn, a still, fightin' all your neighbors, fambly inbreedin' until a good quarter of the kids was idjits. It hacked me, rankled me, from the day I was old enough to know anything at all. I always felt somethin' different, bigger in me. But I didn't know what it was nor how to git it until the war."

Picking up his glass, he drained it. "The army took me out of them hills, and it took my boys and a lot of the rest of our fambly. And for the first time we seen the outside, and we knowed what was out there, we seen generals livin' like goddam kings, we . . . well, we seen a lot of things we never even dreamed of. And me, as head of the fambly, I knowed it was up to me to get the fambly out. Then I got my chance, nemmind how—"

Killraine thought of the robbed pay train.

"And I took it," Lawrence said. "We come west. We found this place. I seen this mill and I knowed I had to have it. And. . . ." his lips curled. "I took it, when the time was right. I have taken some other things as well."

He flung out one big hand in a gesture. "It ain't a patch now to what it's gonna be. I'm gonna build a big chemical amalgamation plant, a smelter. And then, by God, I'll draw ore from the whole Front Range and the Sangre de Cristos, too, every camp up here. And then this town will be another Denver, or maybe bigger. And we'll own it, you understand? Us Lawrences, us poor damn Big Sandy River hillbillies. And the day'll come when this is a state and Lawrences sit in the governor's mansion and the legislature and run it. When Lawrences ride fine horses and their women wear silk underwear. This stamp mill, Killraine; I'm gonna build on that until I got a goddam empire!"

He broke off. "So, you look around. You see what I got. You see how I defend it—not only with sixty blood kin that would die for me, but maybe that many more others I got on my payroll and command their loyalty. You take a good look, and then you go back down yonder to Pueblo and you tell 'em all that anybody comes against Jethro Lawrence cuts his own throat. You tell your Rancho Bravo partners that, too. And next spring, when you bring cattle in, you'll damned sure know who to deal with!"

Killraine stared up into that lean, rawboned face, into eyes touched now with more than a glint, but flaming with something verging on insanity. And something collapsed within him as he knew that Lawrence was right. This

place *was* impregnáble; or at least would cost more in blood than even a hundred thousand dollars was worth.

"So you got until tomorrow noon," Lawrence finished. "And—" He reached for the bottle, poured another drink. "Be down at the bridge at the east end below the pass at nine. You'll see somethin' else."

"What?"

Lawrence drank and grinned. "What happens to a man that tries to shoot a Lawrence here in Raven's Camp. There was a feller drawed a gun on me two days ago, Killraine. He's been tried and convicted by the Raven's Camp vigilance committee for attempted murder. We're hangin' him tomorrow on the dead tree by the bridge. It's somethin' you don't want to miss."

Killraine arose. "Lawrence—"

"You *be* there," Jethro said, locking his gaze with Phil's. "The whole town will. That's a rule, here. When we have a hangin', the whole town turns out and watches. You'd be surprised how easy that makes it to keep folks in line." He finished the drink. "Now, take your rifle and go along in peace, Killraine. There's a livery for your horses and a fair-to-middlin' hotel. Your bill is paid at both. Any whiskey you drink anywhere in town is on me, and if you want a woman—well, we ain't got many of 'em a decent man would touch, but if you're horny, you pick any gal in any bar and it's free. Now. Go along. And mind your manners. Good night, Killraine. See you by the hangin' tree tomorrow, come nine sharp."

Killraine arose. "Thanks for the drinks, Lawrence," was all he said. He went into the other room, took his rifle from the rack, checked to make sure it had not been unloaded in his absence. Lawrence's three younger sons watched him sullenly. He nodded to them with sardonic bravado, went out, mounted up, and set out on a further reconnaissance of Raven's Camp.

Time was short; Killraine had to see everything, and he made a circuit of the valley. He saw how easily the roads from the separate gulches could be commanded, interdicted, and knew now why the oppressed miners had not

united against Jethro Lawrence. He rode up the valley walls, thought he spotted some of Lawrence's strong points. Again he felt grudging admiration for the mountain man. He himself could not have done a better job of fortifying this place. Depressed, he swung back down into town.

The bars, dives and honky-tonks along the main street now went full blast. Killraine was not interested in them; he wanted to find a restaurant. Tying his horses at a rack, he mounted the split-log sidewalk, walked along it heading east. Then passing the open door of a big log building, he stopped short. From it came the rattle of a piano, and, above that, the brassy lift of a woman's voice, trumpeting out a song.

He knew that voice. Something in its timbre lifted the short hair on his neck. He turned. A poster on the building front was a white blotch in darkness. He struck a match and read its crude lettering. MISS JENNY LA TOUCHE AND HER FAMOUS CAKEWALK! DIRECT FROM NEW YORK AND DENVER! TONIGHT AND EVERY NIGHT!

"No, damn it," Killraine said, but he did not move. Then he let out a breath. All right. Maybe the sight of her onstage in all her tawdriness would erase the memory of her in the moonlight beneath the cottonwoods. Maybe watching her strut and caper in her nakedness would revolt him enough to free him from her remembered image. He hesitated only a moment longer then went in.

It was a rough, rugged place, with puncheon floor, raw lumber bar, crude tables and chairs, and a log stage at one end, and it was packed with miners, ranked at the bar and occupying every chair and standing against the walls. Three or four tired-looking, middle-aged percentage girls had given up trying to get customers' attention, because every man in the place was watching Jenny Wallace.

Just inside the door, Killraine halted. She was on stage, strutting back and forth in her raucous cakewalk, and her costume was even scantier than it had been in Pueblo, her motions bawdier. Yet the sight of her hit Killraine like a blow between the eyes. His hand touched the scars her nails had left on his cheek.

Jenny strutted center stage, bent forward to show her breasts, straightened up. The song she roared was bawdy:

> Mama was a lady, Papa traveled lots!
> Then one day a tinker came, mending pans and pots!
> Papa was away—ain't that just like a man?
> Leavin' Mama all alone, with nothin' in her pan.

Pirouetting, she thrust her buttocks at the crowd: it whooped and shouted, drowning out the next salacious lines.

Jenny faced front again, and Killraine's stomach roiled at her obvious enjoyment of the audience's response. It was working, he thought. What a sickening, vile performance. . . .

> When the tinker left her, Mama waved goodbye!
> Now my pot's in order, the tinker heard her cry. . . .

She threw back her head, red hair swirling. Then, straightening, her eyes swept the crowd as she bent forward again, smiling lewdly. Then she missed a beat, another one. She was like that for a second that seemed interminable, her body frozen, breasts dangling. And suddenly Killraine knew that she'd seen him.

Then Jenny came to life. Flinging out her arms, completely out of time, she shouted defiantly the final lines:

> Mama was a woman, Papa was her man!
> But it took a tinker to fix my Mama's pan!

The piano hit a crescendo, died. The crowd leaped to its feet, yelling, whistling. Killraine's stomach clenched; revulsion chilled his flesh. Jenny was looking straight at him; he stared back stonily. Then she bowed, threw kisses to the crowd, ran off stage.

A long time passed and she did not return, and yet Killraine did not leave. When it was obvious she would not come back, a murmur ran through the crowd and men drifted out. Killraine, knees strangely weak, found a table, dropped into a chair. Well it had worked all right,

he thought. It had worked just fine! He ordered a whiskey without realizing he did it and was surprised when it was brought. Savagely, he tossed it off in a pair of swallows. She might as well have gone on the streets, he thought. And what a God damned fool I've been, mooning over her. . . . Well, that's finished. A lot of things are finished. . . .

He was about to order another whiskey. But then she was there, edging through the pawing crowd, face painted, body still about to overflow her scanty costume. Her made-up eyes were enormous. Pulling out a chair, she sat down.

"You," she said harshly. "What the hell are you doing here? You crazy, a total fool? Don't you know what they did to your outfit?"

Killraine sat up straight. "Do you?"

"Bud's bragged about it—" She bit off the words.

"Bud," Killraine said, feeling sick.

"All right," she said, body erect, defiant. "I came here with him. So what? That any concern of yours?"

"No."

"You're damned right it ain't." She was brassier, coarser, than he had remembered her. "That's how I got the money. Dick paid it to you, didn't he? I don't owe you anything except some good advice. Then you and I are quits. Get out of here, Killraine. You don't have a chance against these people. Just. . . ." Her voice faltered, the hard facade trembled slightly as if about to break. "Just for God's sake get out of here."

Killraine said, "Don't worry. I'm going. I have safe conduct until noon tomorrow."

"Jethro gave it to you?" Before he could answer, she went on, earnestly. "Phil, don't wait 'til noon, don't wait at all. Just—" Then she broke off.

A shadow fell across the table, covering it, and a big hand clamped down on her shoulder, jerking her around. Killraine looked up.

"You didn't finish your goddam act," Bud Lawrence said.

"Wait a minute, Bud—" Jenny's face blanched beneath the paint. "I—"

"Shut your mouth. Not only that, but I find you here talkin' with this bastard with the funny hair on his face. I know him, he's that Rancho Bravo joker." His fingers gouged into soft flesh. "What you two whisperin' about?"

Jenny made a sound of pain. Killraine heard his own chair fall over as he came to his feet. "Lawrence," he said in a voice that carried, "take your hands off her!"

"Wait—Phil, no!" Jenny bleated. But to Phil's surprise, Bud obeyed. Lifting his hand, he stepped back a pace and to the side, thick-lipped mouth twisting into a kind of smile beneath his blob of nose, bullet-slug eyes lighting.

"Well," he said, "you die hard, don't you? We sent Ross and Posey after you, but neither one come back. You must be some punkins with a gun, eh? Like with the ladies and with your mouth."

"Then you admit it was the Lawrences," Killraine said, and he felt as if everything within him were molten. His eyes flickered to the two army Colts Bud wore, and his own hand dropped to his side. The holster flap had been turned back ever since he'd entered Raven's Camp. Reason told him that he must dodge a fight, get out safely, but something stronger than reason had him in its grip. For the first time in his life, he really yearned for combat.

Grinning, Lawrence sensed that. "Why, I don't admit nothin'. I make no excuses here in Raven's Camp for anything. And now you're sittin' with my girl—"

"I'm not your girl!" Jenny flared. "Bud, please—"

"You're my girl," Bud said. "It's takin' a while to git that through your head, but you're my girl. Jest like this is my saloon. My daddy give it to me and I own ever'thing in it, and that includes you. And I told you that when you come here." The light in his eyes changed subtly. "And now you're makin' up to this pissant. Well. . . ."

He drew, and somehow Killraine was expecting it and ready. His own hand seemed to move with a speed and smoothness it had never before possessed, a will of its

own. Even before he realized it, the gun was up and cocked and aimed and his finger pulled the trigger. The Colt bucked in his hand, spewing flame and powdersmoke, and he knew that he had won, because Lawrence's hand, fast as it was, still had not cleared his Colt from leather.

Phil's slug caught him just below the breastbone and, at that short range, picked him up and flung him back, shirt smoldering from the muzzle blast. Before Lawrence hit the floor, Phil had cocked and fired again, and the ball caught Lawrence in the belly as he fell. Lawrence landed with a jar that made the lanterns overhead dance; he flung his arms wide, and his heels kicked frantically for a moment. Then his legs straightened out and he was dead.

Killraine stood over him with smoking gun, feeling only joy and satisfaction. "Jesus!" somebody said, "I never seen a draw like that!"

Those words cleared Phil's head of a mist that seemed to fog it. He stepped back, facing the crowd, gun up. Somehow, he had to get out of here. Despite a sense of urgency, he felt strangely calm. "All right," he said. "Nobody moves. You—"

"Phil!" Jenny's scream was like that of the cougar he'd heard nights before. "Look out!"

He caught a glimpse of her painted face, eyes wide, mouth open, staring behind him. He whirled instinctively, lining the gun, but he was too late. They came at him from both flanks, a pair of giant Lawrence men, revolvers out, and as he whirled to face the left one, the one on his right brought down his gunbarrel hard. It smashed into Killraine's wrist with agonizing force and he felt his fingers open. He fumbled for the falling Colt, missed it, hand paralyzed. Then he saw another gun barrel arcing through the air, this one aimed at his face. He tried to duck; there was no time. The blue-steel barrel smashed home: his whole head seemed to explode. That ended it.

At first he was aware only of the pain. It was as if someone was driving an iron spike straight through his head at the temples, then exerting upward pressure to pry

off the top of his skull. Sickened by it, he groaned and retched.

Presently, daring to open his eyes, he wondered if the blow had blinded him. He was in total darkness. His right wrist ached, too, with a lesser hurt. "Hell. . . ." he mumbled.

"Easy, fellow," a voice said from the darkness near him. "They gave you some good licks."

Killraine jerked erect; the pain of doing so made his eyes water. "Where . . . who. . . ."

There was a grim humor in the voice of the other man. "You're in hell. Or pretty damned close. What they call the jail here. Nothing but an old powder magazine. The real hell comes in a couple of hours, when they hang us."

"Hang. . . ." Phil raised his hands to rub his face, found his wrists were bound together. Slowly it came back: Jenny's staring face, Lawrence's body on the floor, the swinging gun barrel. . . . "Hang."

"That's the size of it. Well, you did better'n I did. At least you got *your* Lawrence. Me, I went for the big dog and I missed him."

Killraine leaned against a cold stone wall, head throbbing. "I remember now, Jethro told me. You . . . at nine. . . ."

"Uh-huh. And now they say you keep me company. We'll swing together." The irony left the voice, it turned harsh and bitter. "Well, it's better than the stamp mill."

Phil drew his faculties together with effort, though pain-water still ran down his cheeks. "Who are you?"

"Satterwhite, George Satterwhite, or what's left of him." Only a few feet away, he was still invisible in total darkness. His words were like metal chiming on metal, cold and hard. "I tried to kill Jethro Lawrence."

"Why?"

After a moment Satterwhite said, "Because he ran my brother through the stamp mill."

Killraine dropped his hands. "He *what?*"

"You heard me." Satterwhite's indrawn breath was rasping. "Me and Fred had a mine up in Cross Log

Gulch. Wire gold in quartz, real high-grade stuff. We brought our ore down to Jethro's mill and . . . well, he robbed us blind. Half of what went through there just disappeared. Usual Lawrence tactics. Everybody's put up with it for years. Fred got tired of puttin' up with it."

Killraine heard the sound of him rising to his feet, and his breathing was a steady panting. "The last load we took, he stayed there, watched it through hisself. Lawrence tried to hustle him out, they had a fight. Lawrence said Fred stumbled and fell underneath the hammer. I know better, one of the Mex'cans that saw it told me. Lawrence beat him down with his fists, then threw him under it."

"Good God," Killraine breathed, seeing those terrible hammers falling.

"When . . . when they brought back what was left of him, I went plumb crazy. I took my rifle and went after Jethro. Waited for a shot at him from the hill . . . finally got one and—" He groaned. "Damn my soul, I missed. I never got a second shot. He took cover, I run for it, my horse pulled a tendon, and they caught me. Now I swing. Well anyhow, I'll die happier knowin' Bud's dead. He was the apple of the ole man's eye. At least Jethro knows how it feels now. What happened between you and Bud?"

Numbly, Killraine told him: about the bidding, the robbery, Jenny. . . .

"Well, that's a woman for you," Satterwhite said wryly. "Although, I seen her; she's a lot of woman. She's near 'bout drove Bud crazy, they say."

Killraine raised his head. "Meaning what?"

"He thought he'd bought and paid for her when he brought her up here. But she had a different idea. Said all she was hired to do was sing and dance and he couldn't make the time with her he figured on. . . ."

Something slacked, unwound, within Killraine. "You mean she wouldn't sleep with him?"

"That's the talk. *I* don't know. Had other things on my mind. Poor chippy. Now she'll catch hell from Jethro too, I reckon."

Killraine went cold. "What kind of hell?"

"Don't know, can't guess." Killraine heard him pacing. "They'll think of somethin'. If Jethro don't, the other boys will. God, I wonder what time it is. Been in here so long . . . can't tell day from night. . . ."

Phil hardly heard him. So Jenny hadn't. . . . Suddenly he was raging, full of hatred for the Lawrences, for himself. He knew now the risk she'd taken to try to warn him, and all she'd get for it would be some kind of torture, degradation, maybe even death. . . . Instinctively he strained at the ropes around his wrists, but they did not yield, tied by experts.

"Don't take on so," Satterwhite said. "Nothing you can do. Just—" He broke off; even the sound of his breathing ceased. Then Killraine heard it too; a key turning in a massive lock. The door was opening.

As it cracked, sunlight lanced into the dirt-floored, stone-walled room. Blinded, Killraine blinked. When his vision cleared, Jethro was there. Through the open door Killraine saw his three sons, mounted, guns drawn. Killraine tried to scramble to his feet. Before he made it, Lawrence kicked him in the ribs with brutal force.

"All right!" he roared. "Outside, you pissant! You killed my oldest son, my firstborn, and, by damn, I'd have had your life ere now, except I wanted you to be awake and feel it when we choke you!" His face was tallow-colored, eyes red and bloodshot, mouth contorted. "What I ought to do is run you through the stamp mill! First one hand and then the other, then your legs and then your guts! But what I'm gonna do is swing you from the tree down yonder and leave you there! Not just for a day, but until your goddam bones fall off the rope! And ever'body in this camp is gonna watch you die and see what it means to kill a Lawrence!"

Then he grabbed Killraine, flung him to the door. "Take him, boys!"

Hands seized Phil, dragged him into blinding morning light. Then Lawrence appeared, still raging, dragging the other prisoner. Satterwhite was in his late thirties, blocky, solid, balding, face bruised, and eyes like coals, with great

dark circles under them. His miner's clothes were filthy, his hands tied. He showed no fear.

"Both of you, up on those horses!" In addition to his boys, three other men were in the party; they lifted, shoved the two prisoners into the saddles of wiry mountain-ponies, under gunpoint. Men took the reins, Lawrence mounted, came up beside Philip Killraine. "By rights," he rasped, "I oughta hang that whore of Babylon with you."

Killraine stiffened in the saddle. "Jenny—Lawrence, you can't hang a woman! She's done nothing!"

"She's done plenty," Jethro said. "Makin' up to you in front of Bud. Fightin' like a wildcat when my men took you. They had to coldcock her to stop her. I'd swing her right along with you except the other boys said they had better plans for her. And they got the right idea—Maybe she figgered she was too good for Bud, but when they git through with her, she won't be so high and mighty. Anyhow, if she's so sweet on you, she'll git to see a lot of you. She'll git to see the ravens eat you and the meat they miss drop off your bones while you're hangin' there. She can see her lover ever' day—"

Killraine cursed, lifted bound hands. Lawrence lined his Colt. "Go ahead," he rasped. "But don't count on dyin' quick."

Phil dropped back into the saddle. So this was how it ended, he thought bitterly. For him, for Jenny, maybe for Rancho Bravo. This was what it came to. . . . The most intense despair he'd ever felt gripped him and held him powerless for long moments as they came down off the valley wall and entered the main street of the town.

It was deserted. When they reached its end, Killraine saw why. Both banks of the creek were lined with people; the whole town had been herded out down there by the lightning-blasted aspen to see the Lawrences deal out their vengeance. Then Killraine straightened up. Near the tree, sunlight struck gleams from copper-colored hair. Jenny!

Surrounded by calico-clad, sun-bonnetted women, she

was still in her dance-hall costume. Taloned hands around her upper arms held her prisoner as, seeing Phil, she started forward, mouth opened soundlessly. These were the Lawrence women, drab, work-worn and weatherbeaten, Killraine guessed, and hating her for her ripe loveliness and glad to see her brought low. Then he sucked in breath. One of her eyes was black and swollen almost shut, her cheek puffed with a great, dark bruise.

Killraine turned to Lawrence, and the despair was gone now. His voice was cold, distinct, as he said: "I will give you some good advice. Be damned sure you kill me this morning. Because if you don't, I'll see you dead and all your sons in hell along with you."

Lawrence stared at him, then spat straight into Killraine's face. "You'll be dead enough to suit you," he said harshly. Then, as they neared the crowd he swung forward. "Make way there!" he yelled, and people jostled one another, opening up a lane.

Killraine saw sullen faces staring up at him, some registering horror, others even pity. Most of these people were neither Lawrences nor in their pay, only scared to death of them. Then his horse halted. He and Satterwhite were thigh to thigh under the hanging tree's single limb, from which two fresh ropes dangled.

"Phil!" Jenny's scream sliced through the sudden silence. "Phil!"

A crone slapped her face, pulled her back. "Hush yer jabberjaw! Be still and see yer fancy man git what's comin' to 'im!" Another hand tangled in her hair, wrenched her head around.

"It's all right, Jenny!" Killraine yelled. "It's all right! I'm sorry, it's my fault, not yours—" Suddenly he had so much to say to her, so much to make her understand, but Lawrence's big hand chopped him across the mouth. "You hush, too," said Lawrence coldly. Then he faced the crowd, turning his black gelding in a circle.

"All right," he yelled. "The vigilance committee of Raven's Camp has duly tried and convicted this Killraine and this Satterwhite fer murder and attempted murder. Now you're gonna see what happens to anybody comes

against a Lawrence. Anybody else tries it, he gits the same medicine or worse! Bear that in mind! Now, let's git on with it! The mill's shut down and we're wastin' time." He turned to his sons.

"Rance, put them ropes on 'em."

"Right, Papa." Rance spurred up alongside Killraine, opened the simple loop in the nearest dangling rope. "No fancy knots for you, feller. You choke, slow and hard." Standing in his stirrups, he raised the open noose.

For Kilraine, then, in what he knew would be the last moment of his life, time stood strangely still. The air was sweet and clean and had a taste; the sunlight on the hills was marvelously beautiful; the feel of the horse between his thighs was a joy; and in a moment he would know none of this again. Nor would he kiss Jenny's mouth or hold her body or—

"Now. . . ." Rance said. Then his face changed oddly, jaw dropping, eyes bulging. His outflung breath was foul in Killraine's face. He let go the rope, pitched sideways from the saddle, shirt turning scarlet, and at the same instant there came from the hill below the pass the flat slap of a rifle shot, and Killraine saw a puff of smoke bloom there.

He sat frozen in the saddle for half-a-dozen heartbeats. The gun roared again, and Sonny Lawrence let go the reins, swung his horse, digging his rifle from its sheath. Jethro bawled, "Rance! Oh God, they done shot Rance!" and the rifle fired once more and his black gelding screamed, began to buck. Killraine's amazement broke; he came alive. "Satterwhite!" he bawled. "Ride like hell!" At the same instant he jammed home spurs, bent low over the horse's neck, and the startled animal took off like a rocket, plunging straight into the crowd.

People screamed and dived aside. A Lawrence man raised a rifle; the horse's shoulder hit him, knocked him spinning. Behind Killraine, men were yelling: suddenly there was the rip of lead around his head and shoulders. But up there near the pass the unseen rifleman was hosing fire into the crowd now, and howls of pain attested to his accuracy.

Killraine's bound hands clamped the saddle horn, his thighs gripped the horse's barrel. The animal ran flat out, stretching itself, but canny, sure-footed, with head held high to avoid stepping on the trailing reins. Killraine dared a look, saw Satterwhite pounding along parallel to him. Then he looked over his shoulder: what he saw there brought a wolfish snarl.

The covering fire the marksman up there laid down for them was brutally effective. Even more so was the milling of the startled, frightened crowd. Jethro Lawrence was still trying to calm his black, pitching and squealing in the shallows of the creek. Everybody else was scrabbling for cover. Killraine glimpsed one rawboned man braver than the rest drop to one knee, track Satterwhite with his rifle. He never got off a shot; a slug from the man near the pass smashed his face and he fell backwards on the grass.

And now they were climbing up the valley wall, those tough, great-lunged little mountain-ponies, and the gunfire of the man above them sounded closer. Killraine was about to knee his horse to the right toward it, when Satterwhite yelled, "No! Head left! There's a draw!"

Phil gave the horse knee-pressure the other way; it responded, plunging on, rock rolling behind it, and Satterwhite was coming too. Then he saw it, a shallow ravine opening up, running to the ridge. It would give them cover. . . .

His horse slid down the sloping bank, then stepped on one rein, went to its knee in the bottom of the draw. If Killraine had not been a superb horseman, he'd have been thrown, but his legs were like iron clamps around the horse's barrel. It scrambled up, snorting, raised its head, and as he raked it again with spurs, labored up the draw. Satterwhite was right behind.

Then, ahead, Killraine saw the crest. Once on the reverse slope, if he and Satterwhite could gain the reins— He used his spurs again, the gallant little pony struggled on. Then it made it, scrambled up and raced across the level. Ahead, there was the scanty cover of a grove of lodgepole pines, the biggest ones long since cut down for fuel. Killraine got the horse into the trees, eased his knee

pressure; the animal, winded, checked itself. Satterwhite rode up alongside. Phil leaned out of the saddle, caught Satterwhite's reins in his bound hands, managed to get them over the horse's neck.

Satterwhite's eyes were even more lambent with triumph. "By God, we're loose!" He fished for the lines of Killraine's mount, got them in Phil's hands. To their right, the fire of the hidden rifleman was slackening.

Killraine twisted in the saddle. "You, over there! This way!"

"This way!" Satterwhite bawled. "Follow us! I know this country! Come on, Killraine!"

Up on the hill below the pass, the gunfire ceased. Killraine and Satterwhite trotted mounts through the trees, emerged on the grove's edge. Below, a slope spilled down into a narrow, rugged valley, its bottom timbered, cut with side-canyons. "Make that timber down there and we can lose those bastards!" Satterwhite panted. "I know these hills like the back of my hand. I can mess 'em up so they'll never find us!" He kicked his horse and sent it down the slope. Killraine followed. Then, looking toward his right, he saw another rider break from behind a clump of house-sized rocks. He was tall and thin, bouncing in the saddle, holding the horn with one hand, reins with the other, rifle slung across his back. As Killraine and Satterwhite descended, he rode across the slope to meet them.

Halfway down the hill, their routes intersected. Killraine stared as the man reined up, lean and pimply face pale as paper.

"Jeez, Cap'n Killraine," Dick Wallace panted. "That was close!"

13

The day had been a waking nightmare; the night, Killraine thought, would not be much better. But that did not matter. What mattered was that he was still alive.

Astounded by the sight of Wallace, he had not time for asking questions. Satterwhite led them skidding, plunging down the slope, and they made the timber just in time, for Jethro had finally organized pursuit. It showed on the skyline just as sheltering spruce closed behind them. Nevertheless, in the timber they halted long enough for Dick to cut their bonds with a sheath-knife. But there was still no time for questions; Satterwhite led them on, and it was almost as bad in the woods as it had been on the slope: tree-limbs whipped their faces, and the horses skidded, slipped, on the glassy carpet of fallen needles.

Satterwhite, in the lead, rode purposefully, guiding them into ever-thicker cover. Then up a side-canyon, pushing their tired mounts brutally, and after that another. Finally Satterwhite allowed a halt. Then the questions boiled up out of Phil. "I don't understand it. I saw you ride out of Pueblo headed north—"

"I did that, yes, sir. But I didn't make five miles before I turned around. I was so goddam mad. You told me to git away, like some kinda dog, you wouldn't even take

Jenny's money she sold herself to get for you. . . . I was so mad I wanted to break your goddam neck!"

"A minute more and Lawrence woulda done it for you," put in Satterwhite.

"I swung back to Pueblo to have some words with you. But you was gone, Wolfe said to Raven's Camp. And he told me why, what Lawrence did to Rancho Bravo. Then I wasn't mad any more, just scared. You and Jenny both up here, and I didn't know what to do. . . . But I knew I had to come here and side you if you needed it and see to her, so I used that money you didn't take to buy some guns and ammo and grub and blankets. And then I struck out, must have been right behind you all the way."

Nightfall had caught him on the road; he'd been afraid to keep on over that dangerous trail in darkness. This morning he had topped the pass. "And, Jeez—I saw something happening down there by the river, and then I saw Jenny being pushed around—and then they brought you out and I could see they were gonna hang you. Well, there wasn't even time to think. I just found some cover and started shooting. Got my first bead drawn just as that Lawrence was dropping the rope on you. Gawd, I'm glad I didn't miss!"

"Miss?" Satterwhite blurted. "I never seen such a shootin' fool."

"I told the captain, I can't ride much, but I was the best shot in my outfit."

"You had luck, too. Jethro must have drawn all the guards in to watch the hanging. First mistake I've ever known him to make."

"What I want to know," Dick went on, "is what's the deal with Jenny? I saw women roughin' her around and—"

"Yes." Killraine told him briefly what had happened. Wallace's eyes flared, then turned grim. He looked somehow bigger, older.

"So you killed Bud. And now she's down there for Lawrence to take out all his meanness on."

Killraine thought of what might be happening to her right now. "We'll get her out of there, Dick. Somehow, I

promise you. And there's another promise I made today I'll keep. Lawrence missed his chance to kill me; before I leave Colorado I will see him dead!"

"You or me," Satterwhite said. "All right. Let's ride on. We're a long way from being safe."

Killraine traded his sure-footed mountain-pony to Dick for the clumsy nag he rode. Satterwhite led the men into broken terrain possessed of a wild and terrible grandeur. Killraine lost all sense of direction as they pushed through deep gorges, hidden valleys, up rushing streams, working ever toward higher country. He chose his labyrinthine way with the certainty of a man who knew what he was about; and presently they were able to slow their pace. "If we ain't lost 'em completely, it'll take a hell of a time for 'em to trail us," he said. "And no point in killing horses; we're gonna need 'em."

Nightfall found them in a lost pocket, hemmed in by great cliffs and crags. Killraine felt dwarfed; three humans in these mountains, he thought, were as insignificant as three sand-grains in a ditch. And probably as hard to find.

There was grass for the horses, wood enough to build a fire. Dick had coffee, a pot, and bacon in his bedroll, no other food. "Hell, I didn't know how to cook anything else." The meat and drink revived Killraine. "All right," he said, taking command instinctively. "Now we've got to plan our next move. We have no time to waste at all; every hour Jenny stays in Lawrence's hands may be agony for her." He did not add that it would be agony for him as well. He turned to Satterwhite. "You know him better than I do. Do you think he's likely to . . . to—"

"Kill her? No. No, I don't think so. Not that he ain't mean enough to do it. But she was too popular in Raven's Camp and women are too scarce up here. That would raise a stink, give him trouble he don't need. No, if I know that bunch, what they'll do is just . . . break her. You understand? Them Lawrence women are worse then the men. When they git through with her, and. . . ." he spat. "And with what his boys do too, she'll have the fear of God in her."

"They'll never break her!" Dick flared. "Not Jenny! You don't know Jenny!"

"Easy, Dick. As long as they don't kill her. Nothing else matters as long as she stays alive." Mastering the sickness he felt himself, Killraine arose, began to pace. Three men, he thought, a rifle, a pistol, and a knife. Pathetic forces to throw against the Lawrence clan. But a good commander must never show fear, uncertainty.

First, he needed every scrap of information he could get. "Satterwhite, you've obviously been out here a long time—"

"Fred and me come in '60, with the stamp mill. Steamfitters, boiler-makers, mechanics; we helped install the thing and run it. But with all that gold around, we soon got tired for working for wages. Trained replacements, struck off on our own." He flung out one hand. "Prospected every foot of this country, he and I. Like to hunt, too, and there was plenty of game here, then. That's how we learned this district the way we did. Then we made a strike up in Cross Logs Gulch. Turned out to be rich as hell, pure high-grade. But—just our luck—that was about the time Lawrence came in, took over the mill and camp and just about everything around. The way it worked out, we were spendin' half the time workin' for ourselves, the other half to pay his cut. Just like everybody else. And we got damned good and tired of it."

He paused, threw more wood on the fire. "It was Fred that got fed up soonest. He never was a man to bow his neck to anybody. But, of course, just the two of us couldn't do anything alone. So, on the sly, he started trying to rouse up the miners in Cross Logs and the other gulches. His idea was, if we all joined together and formed our own Vigilance Committee, we could not only stand against Jethro, we could clean out that whole nest of snakes. But Lawrence got wind of it and he picked off the leaders one by one, hauled them up for crimes against mining law, tried and hanged 'em with his own committee. That cooked it quick, mighty quick. I told Fred we'd better clear out too, but he wouldn't listen. He went down and braced Jethro about the hangings, about the theft of

ore. He was half out of his mind with bein' mad. I mean, when Fred got mad, he was like some kind of maniac, and he'd seen good friends swung and. . . . Well, I told you. They didn't bother to try him. They just took him —and a Mexican, he told me; I'd trained him as my replacement on the boilers, he was a good friend of mine. Jethro and the boys took Fred and threw him under a hammer. . . ."

He broke off, looked away. "You know the rest. I went after Jethro, and they caught me, and here we are. . . ."

"Yes." Killraine yearned for a cigar, then put the craving away. "And what about the miners in the gulches? Could we get to them and get some help?"

Satterwhite shook his head. "Not a chance. You hit a good lick when you killed Bud; they was scared to death of him. And this boy gittin' us loose showed that Jethro can be screwed. All the same, he's still the big dog and as long as he's alive, they'll keep their tails between their legs and stay hunkered down. The minute we showed up, somebody would betray us."

"I see." Killraine paused, thinking hard. "But if Jethro himself were dead—"

Satterwhite raised his head. "Why, then, it would be a different thing. A fresh deal all around. With Bud gone, and Rance, and then Jethro—the other boys are lightweights. Yeah. Yeah, they'd be smart enough to take their chances, fight then. Before some other leader rose up in the clan to grind 'em down again."

Killraine nodded, fingering moustaches long since limp and drooping. "Then he's the key to the whole thing. If only—Damn, I wish I had a cigar."

Wallace stood up. "Hell, Captain, why didn't you say so." He went to his blanket roll, came back with a handful. Killraine stared at them.

Wallace grinned, a little shamefacedly. "Jenny hated to see me smoke. But they didn't seem to hurt you and I thought—Only the first one made me sick."

Phil looked at him with a straight face, touched by the flattery of imitation. "I'll be glad to take them off your hands," he said. Greedily, he lit one, drew in smoke. And

now, despite the fatigue and aches and pains, his brain was working clearly.

"Well, we've got to get Jethro then. He's the key to the whole thing. Get our hands on him, take him captive, force him to give us Jenny, use him as hostage for our safe conduct out—and then kill the bastard. Once that's done, the rest would be up to you. If you could raise the miners, I could bring in men from outside. If the miners hit the Lawrences from behind, then we could force that pass. Maybe then the people in Raven's Camp itself would stand up and join us."

"Maybe." Satterwhite looked into the flames. "Sounds good, yeah. Only trouble is, gittin' Jethro. We show our faces in the daytime ten miles around that camp, we're dead. And night—You've seen those stone houses up on the hill where he and his family stay. Like a fort. Three men couldn't get him out of there; hell, a hundred couldn't. On top of which, he don't make the same mistake twice. He called in his guards today to see a hangin' and it cost him plenty. From now on, he'll have a ring around that place a weasel couldn't slip through."

"Still, there has to be a way." Again Killraine began to pace. Stimulated by the cigar, though it was a terrible one, his mind raced. Think of this as a military problem. A raid on a stronger enemy. Tactics— If you had the right tactics, you could bring it off. The elements of a raid against a stronger force— Darkness, confusion, and sheer bravado, daring. The Confederate cavalry had brought off such raids a dozen times. Think of Mosby, Ranger Mosby, in the Valley of Virginia, who'd captured a Northern general in his bed. . . . His mind reduced the problem to basic elements. Darkness, confusion, and a way to draw Jethro Lawrence out of his stronghold and into reach. . . . He halted, wheeled.

"The stamp mill!"

"What" Satterwhite looked at him.

"The stamp mill! It's the heart of Lawrence's whole empire, the key to his control over the other gulches. If

we could slip into Raven's Camp in darkness, get through his guards, and blow up that stamp mill— That would bring him out."

Killraine saw it all in his mind. "Blow up the stamp mill, Jethro would have to come to it. Darkness, confusion, people running in circles. . . . He'd be shouting orders, easy to spot. We could blend in with the crowd, get to him, take him. . . . It's a long chance, sure, but what we need's confusion, turmoil—and Jethro where we can get our hands on him! If we hit the stamp mill, it's like a dagger in his heart!"

"Hey," Dick Wallace said, rising. "That might work."

Killraine disregarded him, watching Satterwhite. Then slowly, George shook his head.

"What," he asked, "you going to use for powder?"

"Why—"

"It would take two hundred pounds of giant powder at the least. We ain't got it. And even if we had it, how would we get it to the mill through all those guards? I ain't sayin' that in the dark we couldn't slip through 'em. But not luggin cans of powder—or with a pack horse. Besides," he went on, "we ain't got no powder and we can't git none. Jethro owns all there is in Raven's Camp —and you seen that magazine we was shut up in. It's all locked up in such places and only he and his boys have the key."

"Then from your mine—or the other miners in the gulches. . . ."

"Jethro's got men at my mine right now, and I already told you, we can't trust nobody in the gulches now." Satterwhite stood up, face grave. "It makes sense to me, Killraine, till you git down to the part about the powder. But to blow a place like that, you got to have the powder. And we ain't got it and we can't git it." Moodily, he built up the fire. "Now, we'd better try to git some sleep. Maybe in the mornin' you'll have another plan."

Killraine nodded, fighting back discouragement. The plan was right, he knew it; knew that he would not make

a better one. But, of course, if they could not get powder it was no plan at all. Well, he would think about it in the morning.

Dick had one set of soogans; they had dried the stinking, lathered horseblankets by the fire; now, as iron chill settled on the mountains, they all rolled up together in the heap of cover as best they could, huddling together for extra warmth. Dick was in the middle, Killraine on one edge, Satterwhite on the other.

Maybe it was the chill to which he was partly exposed; maybe it was the aches and pains of beating he had taken, the sheer fatigue of too many brutal, stressful hours in succession, but Killraine could not sleep. Jenny. . . . He thought of her, of what might be happening to her even now. Surely they would beat her; worse, the remaining Lawrence sons would— He forced the vision from his mind. And it was his fault, all his fault. She was so brave, so gallant, and he was so goddamned helpless. . . .

Tormented, he rolled, tossed, shivered; then finally, he dozed off into fitful sleep.

Later, a rough hand shaking him awakened him. He sat straight up, reaching instinctively for the pistol he had been given by Dick Wallace. "Wha—" It was still black dark.

"Killraine." Satterwhite's hand clamped his arm; his voice was a whisper. "I been thinking. It would work, it sure as hell would work. And, by damn, I know a way to blow the mill without a grain of powder!"

Phil was instantly alert. Rolling out, he threw wood on the fire; it flamed up as Satterwhite got to his feet, eyes shining in the yellow light. Killraine looked at him, teeth chattering with the cold. But the cold no longer mattered.

"All right," he said. "Start talking."

Three nights later, in the shelter of a clump of timber, the three men dismounted. Now, at two in the morning, the night was moonless; it was even darker in the woods. Killraine's first act was to make water. It was, he thought, always this way before a battle: mouth dry, hands cold, bladder full. But once the release of action came, he would be all right. He could trust himself under fire. By now, he was sure he could trust George Satterwhite as well.

"Okay," said Satterwhite. "From here on, we go on foot. Straight up and over the ridge. Then on down the valley and cross the crick to the stamp mill. It's a long way, but there ain't no help for it. We might as well come in wavin' lanterns as to ride in."

"Listen," Dick Wallace whispered. "I got to go with you. Captain, please let me go with you."

"No," Killraine said, voice low but firm. "You job's to stay here, hold the horses, and when the time comes, give us covering fire."

"But, damn it, that's my *sister* down there."

"And the best way you can help her is to do what I say. Besides—a Rancho Bravo man is expected to take the owners' orders without question."

For a moment there was silence. Then Dick whispered, "A Rancho Bravo man?"

This was something Killraine had saved for this moment: a matter of morale. "Of course," he whispered back. "You've been on the Rancho Bravo payroll since three days ago. That is, if you'll take the job. And overlook my stupid misjudgments of you."

"Take . . . take the job? Overlook . . ."

"In Texas they say you have to be a man to ride the river with. You've proved that, Dick. And now we have to count on you. Do you think we'd leave the rifle with you otherwise? Well?"

"Well hell, yes, Captain!" Dick Wallace drew himself up.

"Keep your voice down," snarled Satterwhite.

"I'm sorry. All right, Captain. I'll do what you say."

"Good." Killraine sought his hand, found it, shook it. Vigorously, Dick returned his grip. "All right," Phil went on. "I'm going to run through it again. We're going to try to make the mill and blow it. If that brings Jethro out, we'll do our best to take him alive. Once we've got him, we'll use him to get Jenny. We'll have to play it by ear all the way after the stamp mill goes. If we're not back by daylight, you're to mount and ride. Work your way out of these hills and back to Pueblo. Then you go to Trinidad, find Mr. Gannon, tell him everything and say I said that we'll never have a market here until he and Loosh bring a hundred men in the spring and clean out Raven's Camp. You got it?"

"I've got it, sir."

"All right. We're going in. When you hear the mill go, get up on the ridge and be prepared to cover us. Pick your targets and make sure it's not us you aim at."

"I got that, too."

"Then let's go," Satterwhite said. "We got no time to spare before the sun comes up."

"Right. Good luck, Dick."

Wallace's voice trembled. "Good luck to *you*, Captain."

Satterwhite was a ghost drifting through the timber. Killraine followed close behind, just as silently. And now, he thought, this was the dice's final roll. They had worked out their plan in detail in the past two days, during which Satterwhite had led them on a wide arc through the mountains, giving pursuit time to ebb. It all sounded good in theory; its execution was another matter. But that held true of all combat plans: when the shooting started, luck was good as brains and maybe better. Anyway, they should have the element of surprise on their side.

They left the woods, climbed the ridge, another flank of which they had fled down three days ago, under Dick's covering fire. Satterwhite kept the lead, Wallace's old Navy Colt in his hand. Killraine carried Dick's Bowie: his only weapon until he could get another. "I'm not a knife man," Satterwhite had said.

"Neither am I," Phil had answered, "but I know the bayonet and the saber. I'll take the knife."

Working their way up, they used whatever cover they could find, a boulder here, an outcrop there, a wash. . . . And always they watched the skyline, looking for an indication of a guard.

Satterwhite did not think there'd be one. That night in the mountain pocket he and Phil had sat up late, laying plans while Dick Wallace slept. "Look, I stalked Jethro for a long time, tryin' to get a shot at him. I memorized their whole guard routine. At night they bring in the guards from the ridges, except at both ends of the valley. They watch the pass and they watch the gulch roads. They keep guards around the houses where the fam'ly sleeps, but— What we got to worry about is the guard around the stamp mill. There's four men there all the time, one at each end, one on each side. And we're gonna have to take all four out, somehow. I've got to have five minutes inside the mill and then we'll need another ten, fifteen, at the least, workin' like hell. So those four men have got to go."

"They'll go," Killraine had answered grimly. "One way or another, they will go."

Now the crest loomed above them, a darker line

against the sky. Suddenly Killraine froze; there was motion up there. He caught Satterwhite's arm, and they sank down on their bellies.

Killraine held his breath, strained his eyes. There was someone up there, but, in the darkness. . . .

Then a flare of light: a match. The fool, Killraine thought, but he had the man marked, now, sitting on a rock, facing outward, eyes ranging over the slope on which they lay as he took a break, puffed a cigar.

There was nothing for it but to wait, maybe until the man had smoked the stogie to the end, maybe longer. Phil cursed silently, but neither he nor Satterwhite moved for what seemed endless minutes. Satterwhite, Phil thought, was a good man to have along on such a mission: not only did he know the country and the valley perfectly, but he was wholly nerveless, a machine fueled only by his hatred for the man who'd killed his brother.

Then the winking coal rose and moved: the guard stood up, walked away along the ridge line. Killraine was on his feet in an instant. Crouched low, he edged up the ridge, covering the last dozen yards as soundlessly as a shadow, patient, careful to make no sound. Once the cigar gleam turned toward him; he sank down. When it turned away, he went on.

Then he was on the crest. He could see the guard now, barely fifty feet away, back turned. There was nothing for it but to make that distance in a rush. Killraine bounded like a panther, knife out.

But the guard sensed something, turned. He saw the dark shape that was Killraine coming at him. The cigar dropped as he opened his mouth to yell, tried to raise his rifle.

He was too late by five seconds. Killraine hit him, left hand desperately gripping for the mouth and finding it, right thrusting forward with the Bowie. The man bit down hard on Killraine's hand between his teeth; Killraine thrust again, again, this time up, through the ribs. He must have hit the heart; there was a gurgling sound; the teeth unclamped; the man sagged down. Kilraine struck twice more to make sure. His left hand was ripped, his

right covered with the dead man's blood. Killraine dropped to his belly beside the corpse, panting, hot bile rising in his throat. He lay there for a moment, wiped his hands on his pants, then fumbled for the guard's weapons and ammunition.

Navy Colt, fully loaded; cloth cartridges and caps; Spencer carbine and ammunition belt; a sheathknife. He took them all, depending on George to cover him if anyone had heard the scuffle. Then Satterwhite was there.

"'Hell, Killraine." His whisper was full of awe.

It was the first time Phil had killed a man with a knife, but he had used cold steel of bayonet and saber and recovered quickly. "Take this knife. Let's move on."

And now with Colt and long gun he felt new strength, new confidence. With Satterwhite behind him, they edged across the crest, reached the forward slope, crawled down, and once off the skyline, halted.

Below them the valley of the Raven's Fork was a pool of darkness, only a few random lights burning in the town itself, to their left. The place closed down at one, George said: Jethro's edict. Everyone had to be out and working come first light. To their right, the houses of the Lawrence compound were dark blots on the valley wall: straight ahead, by the river, they could see the monstrous blackness that was the stamp mill. Its stacks were invisible; Killraine could only hope smoke still curled from them. If Satterwhite were wrong, if the fires in the furnaces were out. . . .

"We got two choices," Satterwhite whispered. "Through the rocker sheds on the east or up behind that string of ore wagons on the west. . . ."

"We'll take the ore wagons," Killraine said. He could barely make them out, a cabin of high-sided vehicles parked near the western entrance to the mill. "Let's go."

They slid another few dozen yards. Then they were on their feet, crouching, guns up, working their way down the valley wall, again taking advantage not only of the nearly total darkness but of whatever cover they encountered. Once they brought up against a powder magazine, its heavy door double-padlocked, got their breath, re-

connoitered. All was quiet. Killraine had picked two in the morning as the time when men slept soundest, their faculties at lowest ebb.

Below them now, the road: beyond that the vast complex of the mill, its stacks of woods, ore carts, outbuildings—and the parked wagons. "Cover me," Killraine whispered. Then he ran, down the slope, across the road, brought up soundlessly behind a shed, well away from the mill. He listened; all he could hear was the rushing of the river. It was their ally, would drown any noise they made during the stalk yet to come.

Satterwhite fetched up beside him. Now the wagons were only a dozen yards away, perfect cover to lead them right to the door of the mill. Killraine readied himself to cross the open, then halted as Satterwhite touched his arm and pointed.

Phil's heart sank. With a rifle cradled in his arm, a man was perched on the seat of the wagon closest to the mill. This guard was no fool: he'd picked a place where he commanded a view, had a field of fire that dominated the whole yard. And that high up, would be practically unreachable, save for by a bullet. . . .

So they had to get him down from there. Killraine was trying to think of how when Satterwhite jogged his arm again. Phil turned, barely able to see in the darkness that the man held a chunk of quartz in each hand. There was plenty of it littered around the yard. Satterwhite gestured; Phil understood.

Satterwhite moved out a space and threw a stone. It arched across the open, thumped against the side of the hindmost wagon. Apparently the man did not hear it above the river's rush. Satterwhite threw another one, harder, that hit a wagon closer to the lead one. Still the guard up there did not move. Satterwhite scrabbled for another rock. Killraine caught his arm. "No," he whispered, understanding now. He handed Satterwhite the rifle, then he was moving toward the wagons. And even as he gained their shelter, he was smiling grimly. Another one of Jethro's mistakes, one a West Point man never would have made.

If you put guards out, you had to check them. Regularly, every night. And sometimes by surprise. There was no other way.

These same men had probably stood their share of guard for years; in that whole time, so tight was Lawrence's grip, there had probably been no alarm, especially at the mill. With other guards in the perimeter, this detail would be considered easy duty. And unless a superior popped up regularly on inspection and they felt his wrath if they were lax, they would make a mile of every inch they could take.

This man had not chosen the wagon seat because he was alert; he had taken it because it was so comfortable. At two in the morning with the river's steady rush to lull him—

Killraine went up the wheel.

Elias Whitton would have cut this fellow's throat. Although he had killed once with a knife tonight Phil could not bring himself to do it; the sleeping guard was still snoring softly when he raised his Colt and brought its barrel crashing down with all his strength.

Without a sound, the man fell sideways. Killraine snatched up his rifle, slid down off the wagon. Satterwhite was there.

"Listen," he whispered, "I'll take the right side by the furnace shed, I know the layout. You take the left. We'll meet at the far end, both take the man there. Okay?"

"Move out," Killraine said.

Satterwhite vanished like a ghost.

Killraine trotted to the mill, cast a quick glimpse into its dark, yawning interior, full of poised machinery. Then he edged around its corner. Keeping close to the wall, he moved along; then from darkness a man appeared, coming toward him, rifle in crooked arm. Killraine faded back inside the mill through the open lower part of the wall, crouched by one of the big ore tables. The man strolled past, unsuspecting. Phil stepped out, knife in hand, hating to use it, but having no alternative. Two steps brought him up behind the guard; he leaped, arm clamping around the throat, choking off the air. The knife went in,

under the right ribs at first; then he reached around, drove for the heart. The guard was dead weight after that; Killraine let him drop, trotted toward the mill's far end.

Above the river's sound, a strange, hen-like squawk rose from the building's other side. Killraine rounded the corner. A man stood there, back toward him, rifle lifted. "Hey, Charlie," he called nervously. "Hey, what—"

Killraine sheathed the knife. He raised the carbine, drove the butt home hard, feeling bone give way. The guard pitched forward. Even as his body sprawled, another shape cornered the building yards away. Instinctively Phil reversed the carbine, lined it; then lowered its muzzle as he recognized George Satterwhite.

They dodged inside the mill. "Get him?" Killraine whispered.

"Got him." Satterwhite's voice shook. "Judas, I never killed a man with a knife before. I . . . tell you the truth, I never *killed* a man before. . . ." He leaned against a post, eyes closed, breathing harsh. Then he straightened up. "We're clear, then. All right, let me get to work. You too." He pointed. "On the other side there's a shed and a big woodpile. The furnace doors are there. They fire with wood in daytime, bank with lowgrade coal they dig out down the river at night. I already opened all the drafts and dampers. Just open the first door you come to, use the long rake you'll find there, pull the coals around, feed her wood. I'll be along directly."

"Right." Killraine trotted around the building as Satterwhite disappeared inside.

A long, low open shed jutted out on this side, a huge pile of wood ranked in front of it. Killraine struck a match; then he saw what Satterwhite had already painstakingly described. Three big steam boilers powered the stamp mill. Their furnaces were fed from outside; Killraine saw three iron doors set in a wall of stone. He seized the ring on one, pulled it open, felt a blast of heat, saw the glow of coals. The light shed was enough for him to find the rake. When he scraped the coals around, flame leaped up. Killraine turned, seized a chunk of pine, tossed it in the furnace, then another and another. Flames licked

around them as the wide-open draft sucked air. Working furiously, he filled the big firebox until it would not hold another stick. Then he closed it, went to the second one. By the time he had the coals raked there, Satterwhite came up. Without speaking he opened the third door, and then both men fed the furnaces. Killraine could hear the one he'd already stoked roaring.

When his was full, he closed the door, gave Satterwhite a hand. Two more logs, that firebox was crammed. Satterwhite shut it, and the red glow that, for a moment, had made him look like a demon straight from hell, was blanked off.

"Will that do it?" Killraine asked.

"With luck, we'll get two out of three. Come on, we'd better get some distance. I figure twenty minutes and there's gonna be hell-a-mile here!"

They ran up the creek, crouched low. Three hundred yards away, Satterwhite took cover behind the bank's slope. "Now," he panted. "All we got to do is wait. I checked the gauges. They had three quarters steam already; that's the way Jethro liked it; he can git full steam in ten minutes in the morning. With the drafts wide open and loaded like she is, there'll be full heads just as quick tonight. And I got the work-feed valves and the safety valves all tight shut. In about a quarter of an hour there's gonna be an awful lot of pressure in those boilers with no place to go but straight up!"

He chuckled softly. "Hell, Fred and me put them in ourselves. I can tell you how they'll go. Number one'll pop her rivets, fill that mill with steam. Number two's got stronger seams: she'll blow up like twenty kegs of giant powder. Number three'll blow same time, same force. . . . ."

"You're sure—"

"I'm sure. When they go, it'll sound like the whole world's goin'! And if that don't bring Jethro, nothin' will!" He gripped Killraine's arm. "And when he comes, he's mine!"

Phil felt a new, sudden fear. "He's nobody's, Satterwhite! If we get him, we keep him alive until we've got

that girl, you hear? If you harm him before we've got her safe—"

Satterwhite pulled his hand away. "All I'm sayin' is, when the time is right, he belongs to me!" There was a note in his voice Phil had never heard before, a wild, nearly insane exultancy. And all at once Killraine knew: he would have to watch Satterwhite as well as Jethro.

They lay in the darkness by the stream without speaking for what seemed an eternity. All Killraine could think of was Jenny. Dick Wallace had talked about her last night: *She said if you thought she was so lowdown, she'd show you how lowdown she could really be. She was cryin', laughin', I never saw her like that before.*

The mill exploded.

First there was a muffled crump, and then a terrible hissing, and suddenly, as Killraine stared, vapor boiled up in the night.

"That's number one," Satterwhite whispered. "Now—"

They went together, both other boilers. Their double roar, overlapping, shook the very earth, made the hills ring. Before Phil's eyes, the whole building seemed to lift off its foundations: then it flew apart, wood and stone and metal and cascades of glowing coals from the furnaces like giant fireworks. Bits and pieces sailed high: then the sight was blanked out by a huge cloud of steam.

"Down!" Satterwhite yelled above the echoes. "Down!" He and Killraine burrowed into the bank as hunks of wood and stones rained around them.

And then suddenly it was over, and there was nothing but flickering flame and jetting steam and the great hulks of the hammers left naked in a mass of twisted shafts and glowing metal. One of them was canted off its foundations by the force of the explosion, massive as it was.

Killraine raised his head. Up in the Lawrence compound, lamps were being lit; they flickered on like excited fireflies in the town. "They'll be here any minute," Satterwhite gloated.

"Keep under cover!" Killraine said. "Until we spot Jethro! Then we move out, mix in with the crowd and

take him. Smear your face." He scraped up creekbank mud, wiped his own countenance with it, and George followed suit.

Then the pounding of hooves, the shouting of excited men. "Oh, they're comin'," Satterwhite chortled.

Killraine saw they were, the whole Lawrence clan, some on foot, some on horseback, pouring down the valley wall from the compound. Voices, startled, confused, terrified and angry, rang across the valley. Steam still jetted, hissed from pipes around the wreckage of the boilers. It was like a foretaste of hell, all right, Killraine thought, but in a different way now.

And now the Lawrences, at least two dozen of them, streamed into the plant yard, staring at the destruction. And more destruction was about to follow: glowing coals, lofted high, had landed on the roof of the long washing shed containing all the troughs and rockers; tongues of flame licked high.

And now more men pouring in from the town, and Mexicans from their bunkhouses, and the place was a moil of crowd and steam and flame and wreckage. Then above the other voices, a great one roared: "Open up them flume gates! Git some water on that roof! Where're the guards? By God, I'll skin 'em living! You men, move out there, git some buckets, open up that flume—"

Men ran back and forth, shouting, yelling, vanishing and appearing in the swirling steam. "Jimmy, Bill, Jesse —git over yonder, git them greasers working'—"

Killraine's hand tightened on his pistol butt as he sought that bellow's source. Then he saw it, by an overturned ore wagon, Jethro Lawrence in undershirt, pants, boots, with a rifle in one hand, Colt in the other, swinging off his snorting gelding. Steam swirled around him as he ran up to the building, then recoiled. "Git some men out!" he shrieked, waving both weapons high. "Git some men out and search this place for the bastards that done this!"

"Now!" Killraine said, and he and Satterwhite came up. Nobody paid attention as they crested the bank; Lawrence was running back and forth in the steam, in the

crowd, shouting like a madman. Satterwhite and Phil merely edged into the confusion. Then Jethro appeared, emerging from a cloud of vapor. For one moment, Killraine almost felt pity for him. The man's head was bent, both guns hanging useless in his hands. A week ago he'd been riding high. Now he'd lost two sons and, perhaps even more a cause for grief, his mill, the pounding, crushing heart of all his power.

"Let's take him," Killraine said, and as Lawrence, shoulders slumped, face working, moved away, holstering his Colt, they closed in.

Jethro used his free hand to rub his face, turning to stare once more at the wreckage of his empire. Killraine moved up behind him and simply thrust the barrel of his Colt against his spine.

"Jethro," he said hard into Lawrence's ear. "This is Philip Killraine. You're my prisoner. Drop that rifle, and if you cry out I'll shoot you."

Jethro Lawrence went rigid; even above the hissing of the steam, Killraine heard the great breath he drew in. Then Lawrence said, "You pissant. I mighta knowed."

"Drop the rifle," Killraine said and took Jethro's gun from holster. "Now," he went on, "if you want to live you're gonna stay in tight against me. In this excitement, I can shoot you and nobody'll know."

"No!" George Satterwhite said harshly and he stepped around to face the big man. "You won't shoot him, Killraine. If he gives trouble, this man is mine." He stood on tiptoe to face the giant. "I can't run you through the hammers, Jethro. But I can sure as hell drag you through the steam. I can cook you alive and slow. Either you go with us and you go quiet, or I'll do that."

"You—"

"It'll boil you alive. Strip meat right off your bones. You'll die slow and hard, slower, harder than pore Fred—"

"Satterwhite," Lawrence said with recognition, and now there was chill fear in his voice.

"The one that's left, yeah," said George, and Killraine

could see his face, and Lawrence could read what was in it as easily as he.

And Lawrence was afraid. He knew George meant it. And in this turmoil, he could do it. The rifle dropped. Suddenly no longer the arrogant, roaring giant, Lawrence became in that instant a terrified, confused, bereaved old man. "What is it you want of me?"

"Jenny Wallace," Killraine grated. "You'll take us to her and give her to us and see us safely out of here. And she'd better be alive, goddamn your soul! Where is she?"

Jethro raised an arm that shook. "Up yonder. She fought and carried on so, the women couldn't handle her. The boys and me was out, huntin' you. So we locked her in the powder house."

"George," Killraine said. "Get horses. Lead 'em across the road, wait there. I'll bring Jethro."

Satterwhite's face worked. For one long, tense moment, Killraine thought he would rebel. He saw the struggle played out on the man's features, knew its dimensions, sympathized. George looked toward the ruined mill, a pipe jetting steam. Then slowly he nodded. "Yeah. I'll meet you there." And he trotted off.

"You've got the keys on you?" Killraine asked.

Lawrence hesitated, about to lie. Then he said wearily, "Yeah, I've got 'em."

"Move out," Killraine said, and stayed close behind him with the gun.

It was all so easy. Even easier than he had hoped for when he'd made the plan. Fire, explosion; it was as if a giant anthill had been overturned. And nobody paid attention to a pair of ants threading through the swarm.

Lawrence went meekly; across the road, out of the tumult, George waited with three horses. They mounted, Killraine and Satterwhite both covering the West Virginian with their guns. Then they trotted up the hill to the powder house. Once, Killraine twisted in the saddle to look back. Down there by the river the fire had made headway; the rocker sheds were an inferno. Now men were trying to save the chemical house. The town itself

glared with lights, people streamed through the streets. None of that seemed to have anything to do with them, high on the valley wall.

They reached the powder house. Under their guns Jethro dismounted, took a ring of keys from his belt. Killraine watched him closely, thinking that he had never seen a man more beaten. Lawrence's hand shook so that Satterwhite had to take the key away, unlock the house himself.

The door swung wide. Suddenly someone inside began to whimper. "No," Jenny begged in the voice of a frightened child. "No, please. . . ."

"Watch him, George," Killraine said. He entered the darkness of the place, struck a match on a stone wall. In its flare, he saw Jenny huddled in one corner, still wearing what was left of her dance-hall costume. Killraine's teeth clicked together. She had been thoroughly beaten by someone. She stared at him without recognition.

"Jenny." He went to her. "Jenny, it's me, Phil Killraine. You're all right now, girl. You're fine, you're safe. It's Phil Killraine. And Dick's waiting for us not far from here." He put out his hand, took hers.

Jenny shook her head, matted red hair whirling. Then her vision cleared a little. Her puffed lips moved soundlessly, then formed a word. "Phil. . . ."

He lifted her to her feet. "Come on, we've got to ride."

"Oh, God, I can't believe it. Captain Killraine . . . Phil. . . . Oh, God. . . ." She leaned against him as they went out. "They beat me, those awful women beat me—"

Then they were out of the musty darkness of the house and in the clean, cool night. Jenny saw Lawrence, stopped short. "You," she whispered. She jerked away from Killraine, recoiled in instinctive horror.

"I'm sorry," Lawrence said, voice trembling. "Listen, Missy, these people are gonna kill me . . . I'm sorry for everything I did." He put out a shaking hand, reached for hers.

"Lawrence!" Killraine said sharply, but then Lawrence moved like a panther. He had Jenny's hand and the gun

in Killraine's hand swung into line, but he never pulled the trigger as Lawrence with great strength snapped her around in front of him, left arm across her chest. He twisted, right hand flashed down as boot came up and then a Bowie drawn from a sheath there was in his hand, its blade against Jenny's throat.

"All right, you pissants!" Lawrence roared, voice bull-like. "Drop those guns or I'll slice her throat all to hell!"

Jenny screamed. Lawrence laughed, a deep, ferocious sound. "By God, now you know who's the bull of the woods, you pissants. Drop 'em!"

Killraine stood frozen. Then, slowly, he lowered his gun. "George—"

"She ain't my woman," Satterwhite said thickly. "I don't give a damn what he does to her, it's him I want."

"George—" Killraine yelled in terror. "I said—"

"Please," Jenny said. "Please—" She went limp against Jethro Lawrence, heels of her patent-leather boots digging in the gravel. Her weight threw Lawrence back, the knife left her throat for a second as he went off balance. Then Jenny moved almost too fast for Killraine to see what happened. He knew that, in the darkness, she brought up a foot, twisted, did something with an elbow and a hand. Lawrence gasped, his grip slackened, his knife hand went out, swung back in an arc as Jenny jerked around. As the blade lashed at her face and neck, Killraine had the gun up. It roared, bucking in his hand, and Lawrence screamed, half his cheek blown away. Jenny fell to hands and knees and Lawrence jerked around and suddenly the night was thunderous with gunfire. Satterwhite was shooting now, fast as he could pull the trigger. Ball after ball smashed into Lawrence's chest and belly and drove him back and even after it was done, and he lay flat, Satterwhite whirled to Killraine, snatched Killraine's Colt, pumped round after round into Lawrence's head until there was nothing left. "You son of a bitch!" he screamed. "I should have put you in the steam! I should have put you in the steam!" When the gun clicked on empty, he turned away, making a sobbing noise.

Killraine already had Jenny by the arms, was lifting her to her feet. "You little fool!" he managed. "He could have cut your head off!"

She looked up into his face. To his surprise, she laughed strangely, brassily. "When you've been grabbed by as many men as I have, you know how to make them turn loose! It's the first thing the other girls teach you in the sewin' room!" Then she fell against Killraine.

He held her for a second, tightly, then came back to his senses. The gunfire ringing across the valley would draw men, and there were plenty of Lawrences left. Bodily, he picked her up, plunked her in the saddle of Lawrence's black gelding, swung up behind. "Satterwhite!" he bellowed. "You coming?"

"I'm coming," George said thickly. He was bending over, vomiting. Then he raised his streaming face, mounted, spurred his horse. Killraine kept his arms tightly around Jenny until they made the crest, pounded along the crest until they were challenged, having reached the point where Dick was waiting.

15

"Well, that's the last of them," Wolfe said. Face grim, the marshal rocked back in his saddle, looking at the four bodies dangling from the limb of the huge, lightning-blasted aspen. His sickness with what had happened here today showed in his eyes.

Philip Killraine felt it too. The battle had been one thing; it had been rough and the men from Pueblo had taken casualties. So had the miners from the four gulches. But it had gone off exactly as he and Satterwhite had planned and hoped, and it had been nothing to what it would have been if Jethro Lawrence had been alive to command. Even Jethro could not have won, though, not against the dual blow, the miners from the rear, the Pueblo men from the front.

Battle was one thing, executions another. Fourteen men had been hanged here today, after trial and condemnation by Satterwhite's Four-Gulch vigilance committee. Killraine took little satisfaction that the bodies of Sonny and Jimmy Lawrence had swung from that same limb where their father had planned to swing him. He had seen enough combat to last him his lifetime; what he wanted now was peace. Peace and the woman waiting for him in Pueblo.

His eyes ranged over the miners gathered around the tree. Still caught up in battle fever, they might be hard to control. "Satterwhite," he said. "Why don't you tell 'em that the liquor in every bar down yonder is Jethro Lawrence's treat. After they shed their guns."

"They won't shed their guns," George answered. "But don't worry about 'em. They ain't killers by nature or by trade. They're jest workin' men who see a chance to keep what they earn now. It ain't them you have to worry about." He looked at Wolfe. "It's them buzzards from Pueblo. We won't trade one foot on our neck for another."

Wolfe smiled wryly. "You might have a point there. Killraine, they'll be opening that vault now, Orde and Parsons and the others. You'd do well to be on hand. And you too, Satterwhite."

"Yes," Killraine said. "Come on, George." He spurred his horse. With Wolfe trailing, they rode through town toward Jethro Lawrence's office, near the wreckage of the stamp mill, a charred mess of scrap, bent and ugly, in the evening light, with the big hammers like strange idols left behind by some lost tribe.

Those buzzards from Pueblo, Killraine thought. Well, it was true. Before, they had refused to help him, but when they had seen a chance for profit of their own, they had swarmed to lend him aid, the Pueblo vigilance committee and the businessmen who guided it.

He tried to sort it all out in his mind, everything that had happened since they had met Dick Wallace on the ridge. Jenny in his arms as they escaped once more into the mountains, another fire in another hidden valley, she swathed in Dick's blankets, coffee and food slowly reviving her. Curiously, neither she nor Killraine had much to say to one another.

But he and Satterwhite had stayed up talking long after she slept. "I was crazy," Satterwhite said. "I'm glad I didn't do it, Killraine. To execute him, yes, I'm proud we did that. But to run him through the steam. . . . I know now, I couldn't live with myself if I'd done that."

"Forget it, George," Killraine said. "You have to forget these things." Bouncily, he paced, smoking one of Dick's terrible cigars. "It's still not over. My money's down there, and so is a lot of yours, a lot of other people's. I've still got to get the Rancho Bravo money back. Your miners are entitled to theirs. You said with Lawrence gone they might fight."

"No might to it now," said Satterwhite. "I can raise them. You want to lead 'em?"

"No," Killraine said. "I'm getting Jenny and Dick out of here, down to Pueblo. First, I've got to see her safe. But then I'm going to get together some men of my own. And we're coming back here. If you can hit from behind while we force the pass."

"That can be arranged," Satterwhite said. "I know damn well it can. You make your plan."

"We'll have to set a certain day and time."

"You name it, we'll meet it. But first we've got a lot of riding to git you out and on the road."

They had done that, two days of it, through the labyrinthine ways he knew; finally they hit the Canon City road. "Seven days from now," said Satterwhite as they shook hands. "At four o'clock."

"That's it," Killraine said. "I won't let you down."

Satterwhite grinned. "Captain, that's the least worry in my mind."

After that the quick ride to Pueblo, with a stop in Canon City for supplies and a dress for Jenny. She still seemed dazed, was silent, almost sullen, when they reached the lowland city. Killraine took a suite for her at the hotel, then went to Wolfe's office. "I want you to help me pick some men," he told Wolfe.

The mashal had listened to his story with growing interest. Then he stood up. "First I think we'd better see Parsons and Orde."

Another meeting of the vigilance committee; they questioned Killraine closely. He sensed a ferment of excitement growing in them. "And the miners will hit from behind? And Jethro's dead?" Parsons pressed him. Then Orde cut in.

"Captain, I don't think this is a job for hired gunmen," the banker said. "This is an opportunity to restore law and order in that district, and it seems to me the vigilance committee of Pueblo ought to seize the chance to do it, now that we have some help from the people on the ground. We'll discuss this, but I think I can assure you of all the help you need."

"I don't understand it," Killraine told Wolfe as they left the meeting. "First they wouldn't help and now—"

"And now," Wolfe said, "they smell money. With Lawrence gone, there's a whole new district up for grabs. A stamp mill to be built—that's worth a fortune to whoever gits there first—and banking, express, merchandise. . . . You started the bandwagon rolling, you and that miner. You've done the hard part, now they don't want to be left behind. You'll git your law and order now, Killraine. All that money can buy."

Well, whatever their motives, it had gone off all right. He'd been saved the expense of hiring gunmen; Orde, Parsons, and representatives from Satterwhite's committee were opening and inventorying Jethro's vault right now. All that remained was to claim the Rancho Bravo money, then ride out.

The office building was crowded with men. But only Orde, Parsons, and two miners from Satterwhite's group were in the inner office. There the vault was open, Orde and Parsons bustling around inside it. When Killraine entered, they came out, faces awed. "My heavens," Parsons gasped. "There's a fortune in there!"

"A hundred and four thousand dollars of it belongs to Rancho Bravo," Killraine said. "I'd like to have it in gold specie."

"Why—" Orde's face twisted strangely, "why—I'm afraid it's not all that easy, Captain."

Killraine stiffened, as Wolfe made a wry sound in his throat. "What do you mean, it's not all that easy?" Phil asked.

"Well, there are several aspects to be considered. I mean, I think this money should be deposited in custody of my bank until ownership is settled. I mean, Killraine, you can't just walk in and help yourself to a hundred thousand dollars on your own say-so. I mean, after all, you really have no proof that Lawrence robbed you. I mean, really, how can we be sure any of this money's yours? These things take time and evidence. . . ."

"I haven't got any time," Killraine said. "My outfit's waiting for me at Trinidad."

"Captain Killraine, I just explained. . . . Perhaps by next year when you come back. . . ."

Killraine said, "Orde, I want my money and I want it now. And if I don't get it, do you know what's going to happen?"

"Killraine, are you threatening me?"

"No," said Killraine. "Just telling you. The next time I hit Pueblo, I'll take your bank up by the roots, with about a hundred Texas cowboys to help me. We'll call it the Rancho Bravo vigilance committee. And we will pronounce sentence and carry it out ourselves."

"Why, I—"

Wolfe stepped forward. "Mr. Orde, if you want my professional advice, you'll honor Captain Killraine's claim. Here and now. Do you remember that bidding in

Pueblo? He gave away seventeen thousand dollars to prove himself a man of his word. If he gives his word that he'll take your bank up by the roots, I'm sure he'll do exactly what he says. And me, badge or no, I couldn't begin to stop him."

"We'll help," said Satterwhite. "And if somebody we don't like puts a stamp mill in here, we'll maybe take that up same way."

There was a moment, then, when Orde and Parsons looked at Killraine. Killraine looked back steadily, one hand stroking freshly waxed moustachios.

Then Orde sighed. "It's damned irregular. But . . . all right, Captain. Since we value the business you'll bring to Pueblo."

Killraine smiled. "Actually, I'll take thirty thousand in cash and your signed receipt for the rest deposited in your bank."

Orde's jaw dropped, then he grinned. "Well, now, that's different. Of course, Captain Killraine."

"And," Killraine added, "it had better be there when we need it."

"It will, never fear." And Orde plunged into the vault, began to count.

Killraine and Satterwhite looked at one another and then at Wolfe, and all three grinned.

As Killraine rode back down the mountain, saddlebags loaded and Wolfe flanking him with rifle across his pommel, he thought of the last day in Pueblo before he had ridden out again to fight the final battle of Raven's Camp. Jenny, fully recovered from her beating, was, he thought, even more beautiful devoid of makeup and in a white dress with frills. But she had still been silent, withdrawn, sullen.

And Killraine had not been able to bear to leave her like that, not when he was riding into danger once again. It was time to have it out. He motioned Dick Wallace from the room. When they were alone, he said to Jenny, "All right. What's wrong?"

She looked at him with a touch of defiance. "What makes you think something's wrong?"

"You haven't let me come near you ever since Raven's Camp." He took a step toward her. "Look," he said quietly. "I love you. Don't you know that? Didn't Dick tell you?"

Her lips quivered. "I know. I've known it all along."

"Well, then. . . ." Another step; he reached for her. "What is it?" he exploded as she moved away. "I'm proposing to you, Jenny, I want to marry you. . . ."

"Oh, damn," she said and swung to look out the window.

Killraine's heart had dropped. "You . . . won't accept?" Suddenly it was all a mockery, the risks he'd run, the dreams he'd built.

Jenny whirled, face working. "Don't be a fool!" she snapped. "How can I marry you? How can I go to your Rancho Bravo with you, down there in Texas?"

Killraine thought he understood then, and he stepped back a pace. "I see. Well, yes, it would be dull for you. No cities, no stage, no song and dance. . . ."

Her lips trembled. "Do you think I care about that? You think I haven't had enough of that to last me all my life?"

"Then what?"

"It's the other women!" she wailed. "I love you, Phil, but Dick told me about them. They're such ladies and I'm just . . . just what I am! And it would be wrong for you—"

She came to him. "Take Dick along, it's all he's ever wanted. But leave me here. I'd be ashamed . . . I love you, but I'd be ashamed."

And then he understood, and suddenly he laughed. She loved him and that was all that mattered. He pulled her to him, held her.

And, he thought as he and Wolfe rode down the mountain, what he had said then was the truth. "Don't be afraid. It will be all right. Texas is where people start all over. And that's the thing about Rancho Bravo—there's room enough there for everybody."

MATT BRAUN

NOBLE OUTLAW

He walked tall, shot straight—and never turned his back on a fight.

His name was John Wesley Hardin, and from the time he was fifteen and forced into a killing fight, he was sentenced to live in the shadow of the hanging tree. From the Rio Grande to Abilene, across the bloodsoaked range and in the lawless streets of roaring cattle towns, his two guns wrote his message large and bold for all men to see and fear. John Wesley Hardin wanted only peace, but he was willing to wage a one-man war in order to stay free. And whoever came gunning for him, whether lawman or bounty hunter or raw kid scrapping for a fight, had better be ready to die . . .

CORONET BOOKS

WESTERNS FROM CORONET BOOKS

LOUIS L'AMOUR

☐ 02460 7	To Tame a Land	35p
☐ 01022 3	Hondo	50p
☐ 02708 8	Heller with a Gun	35p
☐ 02409 7	Last Stand at Papago Wells	35p

MATT BRAUN

☐ 19350 6	Mattie Silks	50p
☐ 19351 4	The Savage Land	50p
☐ 20302 1	Cimarron Jordan	75p
☐ 20748 5	Buck Colter	60p
☐ 21249 7	Noble Outlaw	85p

BRIAN GARFIELD

☐ 18295 4	The Last Hard Men	50p

WILLIAM RAYNER

☐ 20009 X	The Trail to Bear Paw Mountain	65p

JONAS WARD

☐ 15473 X	Buchanan's War	30p
☐ 19482 0	Buchanan On the Run	35p
☐ 20579 2	Get Buchanan	50p
☐ 20763 9	Buchanan Takes Over	50p

All these books are available at your local bookshop or newsagent, or can be ordered direct from the publisher. Just tick the titles you want and fill in the form below.

Prices and availability subject to change without notice.

CORONET BOOKS, P.O. Box 11, Falmouth, Cornwall.

Please send cheque or postal order, and allow the following for postage and packing:

U.K.—One book 19p plus 9p per copy for each additional book ordered, up to a maximum of 73p.

B.F.P.O. and EIRE—19p for the first book plus 9p per copy for the next 6 books, thereafter 3p per book.

OTHER OVERSEAS CUSTOMERS—20p for the first book and 10p per copy for each additional book.

Name.....

Address.....

"Nobody does what they did to Rancho Bravo and gets away with it. Not while I'm alive"

Killraine had killed men before. He had been a captain in the Union Army. But he had never had a passion for killing.

Then Jethro Lawrence and his band of thieving cut-throats ambushed the Rancho Bravo wagons and made off with over a hundred thousand hard-earned dollars. Worse, Lawrence had taken Killraine's girl, Jenny, and kept her prisoner.

Killraine was filled with a hate that shocked him. Never before had he known such an overwhelming desire to kill.

Now nothing could stop him from going after the Lawrence gang. Not even the fact that the odds were 50 to 1, and their hideout was a fortress from which no stranger had ever returned – alive.

KQ-405-622

CORONET BOOKS/HODDER FAWCETT

Fiction : Western

UNITED KINGDOM	65p
AUSTRALIA	$2.15*
NEW ZEALAND	$1.95

ISBN 0 340 21752 9

*recommended but not obligatory